



## Factors of juvenile gang culture in Bangladesh: An investigative study in Dhaka

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### Abstract

The objective of the study was to comprehensively analyze factors (motivational and risk) of juvenile gang culture in contemporary Bangladesh. The study employed qualitative methods, utilizing snowball sampling to collect data through in-depth interviews with juvenile gang members from Pallabi (Mirpur). Additionally, twelve Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with experts to address specific challenges and preventive measures related to juvenile gangs in Bangladesh. Secondary data comprised official records from the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP). The analysis involved developing themes based on the consistency between primary and secondary data and theoretical aspects. Findings revealed that juvenile gang members are increasingly involved in serious crimes. Motivational factors for gang involvement have included a quest for instrumental gain, pursuit of excitement, expression of identity, protection, and finding friends. Employing Thornberry's Interactional theoretical lenses, this study has identified several risk factors across multiple dimensions. On an individual level, low self-esteem, prior delinquency, and negative life experiences increase the likelihood of gang involvement. Moreover, family disintegration, inadequate parental attachment and supervision, and a family history of criminal involvement heighten this risk. Furthermore, peer influence is crucial, as juveniles alienated from family and society often seek support from friends, leading to gang affiliation. Lastly, community context plays a substantial role; juveniles in high-crime areas normalize criminal behavior, and community leader endorsement increases the likelihood of gang involvement. This comprehensive analysis highlights the need for multi-sectoral interventions to address the challenges of juvenile gang culture in Bangladesh.

### Keywords:

Community  
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Motivation  
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## 1. Introduction

Youth are traditionally viewed as the future of our nation and the world (Greenberg & Weber, 2008). However, they are increasingly engaging in illegal and undesirable activities, contributing to the formation of juvenile gang culture (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 2017). This has become a significant social problem globally, including in Bangladesh (Amin, 2023). In recent years, Bangladeshi juveniles have been involved in widespread violence and criminality, even in the capital (Islam, 2023) endangering lives and public safety (Haque, 2024). This trend highlights the pervasive issue of "juvenile gang culture" (Amin, 2024) commonly referred to as "Kishore gang" in Bengali discourse (Haque, 2024). Though numerous scholars (see, (Howell, 2010; Thornberry, 1999; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Thrasher, 2013)) have defined youth gangs as groups of young people who engage in criminal activities, typically in a collective and organized manner; characteristics may include a common identity, mutual interest, specific symbols, territory, and initiation rituals. However, in the Bangladeshi context, the term "juvenile" in "juvenile gang" specifically refers to individuals who are under the age of eighteen, according to the legal system of Bangladesh (see, Islam (2023)).

This juvenile gang culture has spread beyond the capital to various cities and districts across the country. There are around 237 'teen gangs' in the country at present, with the highest number of the gangs, 127, in Dhaka city (Amin, 2024). This juvenile gang involved in 25 murders in capital in 2023 (Amin, 2024). The number of cases against juvenile gang member is 780 (Amin, 2024). In that case, although there are various writings about it in different newspapers (see, (Amin, 2023; Amin, 2024; Haque, 2024; Islam, 2023; Islam, 2024)) empirical research on juvenile gangs in Bangladesh is scarce. Though worldwide, numerous studies (see, (Emma Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Craig, Vitaro, Gagnon, & Tremblay, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2010; Esbensen & Carson, 2012; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Gatti, Tremblay, Vitaro, & McDuff, 2005; Gordon et al., 2004; Klein, Weerman, & Thornberry, 2006; Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004)) have examined the characteristics, structure, activities, violence, and demographic information of youth gangs. Moreover, several scholars (see, (Connolly & Jackson, 2019; Krohn, Ward, Thornberry, Lizotte, & Chu, 2011; Melde, Diem, & Drake, 2012; Taylor, Peterson, Esbensen, & Freng, 2007; Thornberry et al., 2003)) have identified various negative consequences of juvenile gang involvement. Additionally, other researchers (see, (Alleyne & Wood, 2014; Breen, Daniels, & Tomlinson, 2019; Carson & Esbensen, 2019; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Freng, 2009; Haymoz, Maxson, & Killias, 2014; Hesselink & Bougard, 2020; Jagers et al., 2013; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Lachman, Roman, & Cahill, 2013; Merrin, Davis, Ingram, & Espelage, 2020; Merrin, Hong, & Espelage, 2015; Owen & Greeff, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Yoder, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2003)) have examined motivational and risk factors across individual, family, peer, school, and community dimensions.

However, most of the studies (see, (Chowdhury, Khan, & Uddin, 2016; Ferdousi, 2011; Khan & Tang, 2023; Khuda, 2019; Patoari, 2020; Sharmin, 2021)) have focused on the prevalence factors of juvenile delinquency, youth violence, and juvenile justice in Bangladesh with only a few studies available on juvenile gangs (see, (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019; Haque & Rana, 2014)). However, neither study discusses the motivational and risk factors for joining various gangs, nor do they explore the characteristics of juvenile gangs. Therefore, an empirical study on juvenile gangs is significantly needed. To fulfil this gap, this study has conducted to address the following research questions: How do motivational and risk factors contribute to juvenile gang culture in contemporary Bangladesh? Correspondingly, the objectives of this study are: firstly, to comprehensively analyze the characteristics of juvenile gangs and the nature of their activities in contemporary Bangladesh; secondly, to investigate and explore the various motivational and risk factors contributing to juvenile gang involvement in Bangladesh; and thirdly, to identify and evaluate effective preventive measures aimed at deterring juvenile gang involvement in Bangladesh.

However, this study on juvenile gangs in Bangladesh is significant for developing a nuanced understanding of juvenile gang culture. It addresses a significant gap in existing literature and has the potential to inform evidence-based policies, enhance law enforcement responses, and contribute to the global discourse on juvenile gang activities. By examining the characteristics, activities, and factors influencing juvenile gang culture, this research will help to formulate effective strategies that promote social harmony, public safety, and national well-being.

### 1.1. Interactional Theory

In conducting this study, the researchers applied 'Interactional Theory' (Thornberry, 1987). Unlike other criminological theories focusing exclusively on social factors or individual traits, Interactional Theory adopts a holistic approach by addressing theoretical gaps in gang research (Emma Alleyne & Wood, 2010). This theory considers the interaction between individual characteristics, social bonds, peer influences, and community contexts (Thornberry & Krohn, 2001; Thornberry et al., 2003). A key feature of Interactional Theory is its emphasis on reciprocal causation, contrasting with the unidirectional nature of other theories (Hall, Thornberry, & Lizotte, 2006; Thornberry, 1987). While grounded in social interaction and social control concepts (Lenzi et al., 2015) it posits that juvenile delinquency and gang involvement result from a

combination of individual traits, social processes, and situational factors (Lee, 2003). Control Theory argues that weakened societal bonds lead to deviant behavior (see, Hirschi (2017)) but fails to consider the influence of antisocial peers on gang membership (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005). Social Learning Theory posits that crime is learned through positive reinforcement and imitation of valued individuals' criminal behavior (Akers, 2013) but it does not specify the degree of criminal affinity required before associating with delinquent peers or gang members (Akers, 2013). Consequently, Interactional Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex factors contributing to juvenile gang culture. By examining the interplay between individual characteristics, social processes, and developmental pathways, this theory offers insights into prevention and intervention strategies aimed at reducing youth delinquency and gang membership (Lee, 2003).

## **2. Materials and Methods**

This study employed qualitative research methods to gain a 'holistic understanding of factors related to gang culture' (Frisby-Osman & Wood, 2022; Hesselink & Bougard, 2020). The research was conducted in Pallabi, Mirpur, chosen for its high incidence of juvenile gang activities (Amin, 2023; Islam, 2024). As gang youth are notoriously difficult to access for research purposes (Sanders, Lankenau, & Jackson-Bloom, 2010) this study followed Cohen and Arieli (2011) in employing "snowball sampling" to recruit informants with the help of a crime reporter who had previously created a documentary on gang youth. Through this initial contact, the study managed to recruit four additional gang members. Following prior studies on juvenile gangs (see, (Breen et al., 2019; Carson & Esbensen, 2019; Owen & Greeff, 2015)) the study predominantly used in-depth interviews to collect data from the five juvenile gang members between 8 May 2024 and 19 May 2024. Moreover, following Meuser and Nagel (1991) twelve Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with experts (crime reporters, academics, activists, police, and lawyers) to address specific challenges of juvenile gangs in Bangladesh. This combination of interviews facilitated an exploration of the motivations, risks, and preventive measures related to juvenile gang activities in contemporary Bangladesh. During interviews with juvenile gang members, the study adhered to 'research ethics, addressing issues of suspicion and risk' (Pawelz, 2018). In addition to primary data, secondary data were utilized to fulfil research objectives. Secondary data included official records from the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) and a review of relevant literature and policy documents. Data were processed and analyzed by transcribing interviews, translating them into English, and structuring both primary and secondary data through meaning condensation and interpretation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Pseudonyms e.g. Kajol, Bobby, Rakib, Sumon, Rafi were used for informants to ensure "anonymity" (Pawelz, 2018). Finally, "thematic analysis" (Ashton & Bussu, 2020) was conducted to align data with theoretical frameworks, integrating both primary and secondary data for comprehensive insights.

## **3. Findings and Discussions**

### *3.1. Characteristics of Juvenile Gangs and Nature of their Activities*

The structure of gangs and gang activity is an important issue for specifically understanding gangs (Decker & Curry, 2000). Klein et al. (2006) observed that juvenile gangs are organized and ritualized, whereas this study depicts juvenile gangs as functioning as structured or semi-structured entities with defined roles. They exhibit an informal hierarchy where members perform specific tasks to maintain the gang's operations. They significantly deviate from mainstream culture, forming distinct groups with alternative practices that conflict with societal norms. Decker and Curry (2000) found that 82% of gang members acknowledged their gangs had rules. This study also noted that juvenile gangs often operate on "camaraderie," with members having close relationships, and boys are more likely to join than girls, aligning with findings by Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, Howell, and Kosterman (2014). However, gangs can be transient, as Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) noted. In the current study, Bobby explained that pre-existing gangs often dissolve and re-form due to internal conflicts and power struggles, leading to the creation of new factions.

Among the five informants in the study, all classified as juveniles under eighteen. Despite being classified as juveniles under eighteen, DMP's docket files indicate many individuals over eighteen are involved in juvenile gangs. Previous research (see, (Breen et al., 2019; Gatti et al., 2005; Thornberry et al., 1993)) notes higher gang involvement among young people aged ten to eighteen. The DMP report shows gang sizes ranging from fewer than five to forty-five members; Bobby's group comprising around thirty-five members and Kajol's between ten and twelve.

Moreover, Rakib, Rafi, and Sumon noted a gang leader exists within their group, contrasting with Kajol and Bobby's view that not all teenage gangs have a leader. Bobby clarified, "*The current group he is involved with lacks an official leader, although his peers acknowledge his informal leadership.*" This aligns with the DMP's report on juvenile gangs, where nearly fifty percent reported having a "leader" (Decker & Curry, 2000). Klein and Maxson (2006) further suggest that gang leadership tends to be transient. Their findings indicate most gangs operate without a designated leader and often have unique names. Bobby also discusses an implicit chain of command within gangs, irrespective of formal leadership.

However, these gangs often adopt unique names (Islam, 2023) or are named after their most influential member. Moreover, the greater the number of weapons a gang possesses, the stronger its perceived power. Leaders typically assert dominance through aggressive actions and serious criminal activities. Interviews with Bobby and Rafi revealed that these groups often choose names with special significance, sometimes based on notable events or family names of leaders. For example, Bobby is commonly referred to as 'Kana Bobby' after an incident where he blinded three rival gang members with a fork. Similarly, other members may acquire nicknames that reflect their actions or characteristics, such as 'Tan Akash' instead of simply 'Akash' or 'Galkata Rabbi' rather than 'Rabbi.'

The study also noted their use of logos to mark territories, often painted on walls or depicted through graffiti. These gangs typically form around specific neighborhoods, with members residing in close proximity and sharing a similar social milieu. As a result, their influence and activities are localized. Bobby mentioned, *"We create various graffiti like 'freestyle,' 'picchi bobby,' and 'top syndicate.'"* Moreover, the names of these gangs often embody their mission and vision, often rooted in local language to convey a specific identity. Rafi elaborates, *"Bhaira De,' our group's name, signifies our aggressive stance in response to provocation."* This name underscores their readiness to defend themselves forcefully, enhancing their reputation and warning potential challengers. Additionally, Bobby mentioned, *"we gather in various locations, hold meetings, and maintain separate apartments."* If attacked, they retaliate promptly. In a detailed interview, Kajol reveals that their gang meets daily at a designated location, often in a secluded alley.

When asked about their involvement in organized crime, the study's informants cited robbery, burglary, extortion, and snatching within their locality. They generally use native weapons (axe, chapati, ram-da, gear) and have been known to injure pedestrians during robberies. Failure to pay extortion money (known as chanda) often lead to violent reprisals, occasionally resulting in fatalities. Additionally, they carry out tasks for local figures, including fighting at political events or asserting dominance. Kajol mentions receiving money from these figures for such activities, which they often spend on drugs. Furthermore, they are implicated in land and house seizures, as well as illegal betting. Analysis of DMP records reveals that crimes committed by juvenile gang members align with multiple sections of the Penal Code of 1860, specifically sections 142, 143, 147, 148, 302, 307, 308, 323, 324, 326, 334, 341, 379, 384, 385, 386, 427, 448, and 506.

However, in contrast to Western studies documenting juvenile gangs' involvement in robbery, property crime, substance abuse, trafficking, murder, threats, intimidation, weapons-related offenses, gun violence, and aggravated assault (see, (Esbensen et al., 2009; Gordon et al., 2004; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Thornberry et al., 2003)) it has been argued that youth gangs in the subcontinent engage in less severe violence (see, Chu, Daffern, Thomas, and Lim (2012)). However, this study reveals that juvenile gang members in Bangladesh are actively involved in more severe forms of violence.

### *3.2. Reason of Juvenile Gang Members towards Rigorous Violent Activities*

This study examines why juvenile join gangs and engage in extreme violence. It highlights that the pursuit of identity and status significantly contributes to violent behavior among juvenile gang members. Violence serves as a means to assert dominance over rivals, protect gang territory, and enhance status within the group (Short & Strodbeck, 1965). Rakib explains, "We commit severe crimes to gain power and fame." Bobby similarly reflects, *"Twice I took risks, hoping to become so notorious that I could rule over Mirpur. Both times, I achieved significant notoriety. Now everyone knows [sobar mukhe mukhe] me as that daring Bobby."* These findings align with Goldman, Giles, and Hogg (2014) study. Power, often equated with dominance and control over rival gangs and the surrounding community (Klein & Maxson, 2006) is maintained by gangs through the use of fear to manage territories, intimidate rivals, and assert authority (Esbensen & Carson, 2012).

Moreover, the normalization of violence plays a significant role in increasing the propensity to engage in rigorous violent crime. A concerning trend emerges from the report (see, Amin (2023)) suggesting a potential normalization of criminal behavior within this specific location. Bobby also pointed out this process of normalization. Studies have found that drugs and substance abuse within gangs serve as potent accelerants for escalating violent tendencies among members (see, Klein and Maxson (2006)). Additionally, Kajol and Rakib indicated that gang members possess all kinds of weapons, which they use against anyone. The easy availability or supply of weapons makes them more violent. These findings are consistent with several studies (Anderson, Brown, & Davis, 2020; Decker & Pyrooz, 2010). Bobby disclosed that political leaders patronize these gangs, providing logistical support, weapons, and shielding gang members from law enforcement, which proliferates the scope of serious violent activities. In return, youth gangs engage in tender manipulation, extortion, and territorial control on behalf of their political patrons. Furthermore, this study reveals that the low implementation of social control and weak enforcement of the law significantly contribute to the propensity of juvenile gang members to engage in rigorous violent crime. The statements of Kajol, Bobby, and Rafi indicate that there is inadequate social control in the places where they live. The way juvenile gangs openly conduct their activities shows that they do not care about the law. The study denotes that when there is a perceived lack of consequences for criminal behavior, young people may feel emboldened to act with impunity, believing they can get away with violent acts without facing repercussions. This diminished fear of punishment leads to serious violent activity (Howell, 2010).

### *3.3. Motivational Factors for Juvenile Gang Involvement*

This study finds that juvenile involvement in gangs is driven by complex and diverse motivations, shaped by individual circumstances and community settings. Interviews with gang members explored why and how youth are motivated to join gangs—the findings highlight a range of interconnected factors such as instrumental gain, excitement, identity, and protection and companionship.

#### *3.3.1. Instrumental Gain*

This study found that all juvenile informants live in disadvantaged communities, which often leads to joining gangs as a means of accessing financial opportunities (Howell, 2010). The immediate financial rewards can be instrumental, providing juveniles with money, material goods, and an otherwise unattainable lifestyle (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). In impoverished neighborhoods with scarce opportunities, joining a gang may seem like a viable way to quickly gain privilege, as seen in the case of juvenile gang member Kajol. When we asked him why he was motivated to join a juvenile gang, he replied,

*"I joined this group due to financial difficulties. It was observed that an elder brother within the group would often call, handing over 500 or 1000 taka, instructing that certain tasks needed to be completed...when I started hanging out with my friends, I felt lower-class compared to them. They had bikes, money, cars, houses—everything, while I had nothing. I felt insignificant and tiny. I thought that if I got involved with 'boro bhai' in the gang, maybe they'd let me ride their bikes."*

Kajol, from a financially struggling family, seemed gang membership as a means to achieve instrumental gain and alleviate economic strain. Despite living in a slum, he associated with upper-class peers, seeking to elevate his social status. He felt acutely aware of his lower-class background compared to friends who had bikes, money, cars, and houses. Kajol believed that involvement in gang activities might help him gain access to these luxuries, like riding gang leader's bikes. His gang involvement, motivated by a desire for instrumental gain, aligns with studies (see, (Lachman et al., 2013; Owen & Greeff, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011)) which highlight instrumental gain as a key motivational factor.

#### *3.3.2. Pursuit of Excitement*

Study finds, joining the juvenile gang motivated Kajol to seek excitement. He was drawn to the gang because he saw its members instilling fear in others and envisioned himself in that powerful position. The thrill of doing something daring was a major factor. Excitement, driven by an atmosphere of fear, power, and dominance, is a key motivator for joining gangs. Sumon denotes, *"When we go to their area, they scared us like death. When they see us, they're scared as they've seen a tiger. If we go to that area, we intimidate them with threats and violence."* By stating that the opposing group is "scared us like death" when gang members enter their area, Kajol emphasizes the level of fear they can create. This creation of fear is itself a source of excitement. He further asserts their intimidation tactics by claiming that when the opposing members see them, they are "scared like they've seen a tiger." This comparison highlights the intensity of the fear the gang believes they instill in others, reinforcing their perceived dominance and excitement. This study aligns with other research (see, (Decker & Curry, 2000; Owen & Greeff, 2015)) which found that the pursuit of excitement is a prime motivator for gang involvement.

#### *3.3.3. Attend to Express Identity*

This study found that joining a juvenile gang is a way to establish or reinforce identity. In-depth interviews with all informants revealed that gang membership provides a clear sense of purpose, values, and group norms, helping to shape one's identity. There is a linear relationship between gang membership and seeking power. Besides, members of juvenile gangs aim to create an identity through gaining power and status (Breen et al., 2019). Kajol highlights, *"Those who are already involved in gang they had extra power. That's why I was more drawn towards them. I felt like they would also fear of me like this."* In this regard, it signifies that their identity primarily evolves through exploring others' thoughts. In constructing this identity, they take numerous risks, showing no hesitation in endangering their own lives or causing harm to others.

Furthermore, Rakib disclosed that his desire for dominance and leadership propelled him to join the gang, aspiring to become a "gang star" as he matures. This identity serves as a thrilling source of validation, with the belief that gaining recognition affirms their existence. Influenced by heroic ideals, they actively seek power to assert their presence, rooted in their ability to intimidate others. Bobby said, *"Once, when someone noticed me, they were so frightened that even though they were in a vehicle, they ran away in fear, hiding their face. Even Satan says, 'I dare not stand in front of Bobby' [ami jeno Bobboyyr samne na pori]."* Based on the above analysis, this study found similarities with other studies (see, (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Decker & Curry, 2000; Klein & Maxson, 2006)) which also concluded that juveniles are motivated to join gangs due to gaining identity.

#### *3.3.4. Protection and Finding Friends*

Most participants in this study of juvenile gang members stated joining for protection and status within a powerful group (Thornberry, 1999). Sumon emphasized gangs' ability to exert control and influence in their communities. Whereas, Kajol shared his reason for joining, stating, *"...I was beaten and couldn't defend myself at*

school. Forming a group with 4-5 friends, we retaliated collectively, gaining respect and demand.” However, Juveniles don’t join gangs solely for security or power but for companionship and social bonding, with friendship a key motivator (Thornberry et al., 2003). Youth gangs are characterized by cohesive dynamics and collective prowess, motivating individuals to align with such groups. This study supports prior research (see, (Decker & Curry, 2000; Melde et al., 2012; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011)) showing juveniles join gangs to make friends or seek protection.

### *3.4. The Risk Factors for Juvenile Gang Involvement*

Following the interactional theoretical aspect (see, (Thornberry, 1987; Thornberry & Krohn, 2001; Thornberry & Krohn, 2017)) this study explored the risk factors for joining juvenile gangs. It found that juvenile gang membership is often influenced by a multitude of risk factors across various dimensions, encompassing individual, family, peer group, school, and community spheres (see, (Esbensen et al., 2009; Lenzi et al., 2015)).

#### *3.4.1. Individual Dimension of Juvenile Gang Involvement*

This study underscores the significant role of individual factors in juvenile gang involvement, encompassing personal influences that increase susceptibility. It suggests that gangs fulfill needs for belonging, identity, and purpose among vulnerable juveniles with low self-esteem. Additionally, gang affiliation may provide opportunities for power, recognition, and enhanced social status within peer groups (see, Decker and Curry (2000)). The study supports previous research (see, (Craig et al., 2002; Donnellan et al., 2005; Merrin et al., 2015; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Yoder et al., 2003)) indicating a link between low self-esteem and gang involvement. However, the relationship between self-esteem and gang membership varies, emphasizing the complex interaction of low self-esteem with individual, familial, and environmental factors in influencing susceptibility to gangs (Esbensen et al., 2009).

Moreover, several informants, including Kajol, Suman, and Rafi, admitted to engaging in various deviant activities before joining a juvenile gang, such as disobeying parents, fighting during play, skipping school, and drug abusing. These behaviors led them to form peer groups in their neighborhood and school based on similar interests. Rafi’s account illustrates how prior deviant behavior, including fighting, drug use, vandalism, and verbal abuse, contributed to his involvement in juvenile gangs, eventually resulting in his incarceration. His alienation from family reduced access to support networks, pushing him to seek acceptance in gangs where such behaviors are encouraged (Thornberry et al., 2003). This underscores how early delinquency can escalate into deeper criminal involvement, as individuals shift their need for identity and support from family to gang affiliations. Rafi noted that many later joined juvenile gangs, where their friendships deepened. This prior history of delinquency suggests a willingness to engage in further illegal activities, aligning with gang behaviors and expectations (Alleyne & Wood, 2014; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Gordon et al., 2004; Haymoz et al., 2014; Hill et al., 2017).

This study found negative life experiences (Baglivio & Epps, 2016) such as exposure to absolute alienation, broken family or parentless, neglect, or severe economic hardship, significantly increase the risk of juvenile gang involvement. These adverse conditions lead to feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, and a desire for protection and belonging, which gangs often promise to provide (Smith & Thornberry, 1995). When Bobby’s mother leaves him after his father’s death, this comes as a shock to him. This uprooting of him or losing the touch of parent’s affection basically triggered a very negative experience in his life, which served as a trauma for his life, and which he still carries. Whereas Rafi says that Rafi himself is carrying negative life experiences. On the one hand his family is poor and on the other hand he is deprived of the care of parents in his family. Lacking the affection of his parents, when he mingles with friends, he goes bad and his parents send him to jail. So, the cumulative effect of these negative experiences creates a fertile ground for gang recruitment, as vulnerable youth look for ways to cope with and escape their challenging circumstances. These findings are similar to those of the study by Klein and Maxson (2006) and Baglivio and Epps (2016).

#### *3.4.2. Family Dimension of Juvenile Gang Involvement*

The family plays a pivotal role in juvenile gang involvement, significantly shaping a child’s development and behavior (Krohn et al., 2011). This study finds socio-economic hardship within families emerges as a key risk factor, impacting both family structure and individual adolescents. Kajol exemplifies this, attributing his gang involvement to family financial stress, which often leads to a scarcity of resources, fostering deprivation, frustration, and low self-esteem among youth. Moreover, economically strained families often reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods where gang activity thrives, offering community, identity, and financial opportunities perceived as ‘unattainable through conventional means’ (Merrin et al., 2020) akin to Kajol’s experience.

Moreover, broken family and maltreatment significantly increases the risk of juvenile gang involvement by creating a foundation of trauma and instability (Kubik, Docherty, & Boxer, 2019). Bobby serves as a poignant example of the repercussions of inadequate familial care, leading to involvement in juvenile gangs. Describing a deep sense of loneliness comparable to a “cow separated from its herd”, Bobby highlights the

profound emotional impact of growing up without parents. The abandonment by his mother, who remarried after his father's death and left him behind, caused immense pain and anger, leading to self-destructive behavior such as *"punching a wall until my hand bled (amar haat bhugla bhugla hoye rokto porte thake)"*. This trauma plunged him into a state of despair: *"My life didn't truly come to an end when I joined a gang. It ended with the dissolution of my family. Just as the river's waves breach its banks, similar waves crashed into my life."* Family absence and maltreatment hinder children's development, leading to severe psychological damage and increased delinquent behavior risks (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011) as seen in Bobby's case. Moreover, Rafi acknowledges significant neglect from his family, especially his parents, and was sent to a correctional centre at a young age, which he describes as *"a place like a prison."* This experience deeply instilled feelings of neglect in Rafi, a form of maltreatment that frequently leads juveniles to join juvenile gangs (see, Farrington and Loeber (2000)).

In addition to, Rafi's experience vividly illustrates the impact of inadequate parental attachment, supervision, and control on children, exposing them to external influences and increasing their susceptibility to involvement in gang activities as they seek the support and guidance absent in their parents. Reflecting on his upbringing, Rafi recalls, *"My parents never paid attention to what I was doing when I was young. I used to hang out with my friends,"* describing a childhood characterized by isolation and neglect. This absence of parental presence creates a void that gangs often fill for adolescents in search of emotional connection, guidance, and protection (Decker & Curry, 2000).

Besides, having a family member involved in crime poses a significant risk factor for juvenile gang involvement, as demonstrated by Rafi's experiences. He exposed, *"My father was a member of the Naira group. My father was scarier than me. My father used to go to Palashnagar, Lal Matiya with the 'Naira' group for robbery and extortion."* This familial connection to crime creates an environment where illegal activities are normalized and even glorified, making it more likely for youth to follow in their relatives' footsteps (Merrin et al., 2015).

#### *3.4.3. Peer Dimension of Juvenile Gang Involvement*

This study demonstrates that peers play a crucial role in juvenile gang involvement, acting as both catalysts and reinforcers. When peers are involved in gangs, the likelihood of an individual joining increases significantly (Thornberry et al., 2003). Most informants spend their time with peer groups, and the amount of time youths spend together is relevant to understanding delinquent behavior (Haynie & Osgood, 2005). During this time, they learn and reinforce various behaviors, whether prosocial, deviant, or criminal (Dishion, 2000). For example, Sumon learned about gangs from a friend who motivated him to join. Similarly, Rafi shared, *"My parents frequently left me alone, which led me to spend time outside with other boys. In their absence, I would socialize and drink with my peers. I often observed my friends fighting, which influenced me to join them."* Moreover, juvenile gang membership is associated with a higher rate of offending, even after accounting for delinquent friends (Klein & Maxson, 2006). This aligns with Lenzi et al. (2015) who noted that juveniles are motivated to join peer groups because they already have friends in them. This association provides direct exposure to gang lifestyles, including criminal activities and values that promote delinquency (Haynie & Osgood, 2005). This study corroborates previous research (see, (Farrington & Loeber, 2000; Gordon et al., 2004; Merrin et al., 2015)) that identified the significant role of peers in juvenile gang involvement.

#### *3.4.4. School Dimension of Juvenile Gang Involvement*

Schools, while fostering educational and behavioral development, also act as primary social control mechanisms, handling issues beyond family capacity and supporting at-risk youth (Nuño & Katz, 2019). Despite these roles, schools have been noted as environments where gang formation can begin (Thornberry et al., 2003). Interviews revealed that none of the informants in this study successfully completed secondary school; three individuals did not even pass the primary level. Among the participants, Kajol had the highest level of education, having studied up to the 10th grade. Kajol attributed his inability to complete his studies to the influence of his peer group, with whom he formed friendships during school. Many of these peers later became gang members. This evidence suggests that gangs are not solely formed outside of school; rather, the school environment itself fosters conditions conducive to gang formation.

Conversely, Rafi had a strong aversion to attending school. He often absconded with his peers to socialize, leading to poor academic performance and eventually dropping out. His truancy and preference for peer bonding over academics contributed to his failure and subsequent gang involvement. This case highlights the school's failure to provide adequate support and monitoring. In this context, the statements of Kajol and Bobby are particularly significant. They indicate that the neighborhoods they live in are socially disorganized and have high crime rates. This implies that the social structure of the school, typically referring to its social composition, is linked to delinquency. Moreover, Rafi's disregard for school norms fostered a 'culture of crime and misconduct' (Wilcox & Clayton, 2001) within the school. These findings align with previous research (Alleyn & Wood, 2010; Hill et al., 2017; Howell, 2010) which identifies poor school commitment, academic failure, peer influence, and dropout as significant risk factors for juvenile gang involvement.

### *3.4.5. Community Dimension of Juvenile Gang Involvement*

When the researchers inquired about the impact of the community on their gang involvement, the informants reported that it had a significant influence on them. Kajol highlighted, *"In the area where I reside, which is a slum, the majority of inhabitants are entangled in criminal activities. If queried about my involvement in these affairs, I would attribute it to the nature of our locality."* Kajol's statement indicates that high crime rates in a community significantly increase the risk of juvenile gang involvement (Thornberry, 1999). In Mirpur, incidents of snatching and mugging are notably higher (Islam, 2023) and Mirpur ranks second in terms of murder rates (Amin, 2024). When crime is prevalent, it creates an environment where illegal activities are normalized (Farrington & Loeber, 2000) and young individuals are more likely to be exposed to criminal behavior. As Bobby denoted, *"We actually learned from our seniors to engage in these fights. We used to see our seniors fighting in the area with various indigenous weapons, and we are learning from them. They are given shelter by the influential leaders of the area."* Since childhood, they have seen their seniors involved in violent activities, indicating that such behavior is common in their area. Besides, they have strong shelter to conduct their unlawful activities.

Similarly, Rakib argued, *"We have support for our activities, starting with the acquisition of weapons. We also have resources to handle any legal issues that arise. If a case is filed against us, we know how to navigate the situation. If one source cannot provide support, another will step in."* It reveals that influential leaders play a significant role in forming and expanding youth gangs, 'using juvenile' (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019) to maintain their hegemony. Many of these juveniles come from marginalized areas with limited economic opportunities and facilities. These leaders ensure the release of youths caught by police for crimes. When community leaders, including local politicians or influential elders, implicitly or explicitly endorse gang activities, it sends a powerful message to young people that such behavior is acceptable or commendable.

## **4. Recommendation**

When we ask the Key informants about the preventive measures on juvenile gang culture they unanimously emphasized the critical role of family in preventing juvenile gang involvement. They believe that the family's foundational influence is paramount, with proper parental guidance on social circles, activities, and whereabouts being crucial. As a criminologist, Bashir underscored the importance of *"quality family time with enhancing attachment in mitigating gang risks"*. Moreover, Firoz (crime reporter) advocated for parental focus and participation in children's education and social activities to understand and guide them better. As law enforcement officer Kaiser (police super) highlighted the need for parents to closely monitor their children's company and activities to prevent gang involvement.

The education system is crucial in preventing juvenile gang involvement. Experts Bashir, Sabina (sociologist), and Ashik (crime reporter) emphasized creating safe school environments, promoting positive peer relationships, and enhancing academic engagement through counselling, mentoring, and extracurricular activities. Shahnaz (lawyer) highlighted the need for more research on school dropouts and advocated for relevant curricula and support for struggling students. Collaborating with community organizations for after-school programs and raising awareness were also suggested as effective strategies.

Moreover, Mortuza (crime reporter) brought attention to the social structure and the plight of street children in Dhaka, questioning the responsibility of the state and society in addressing their needs. Zami (journalist) and Rakhil (activist) question about *"the state's developmental policy and demise of former sphere"*. They noted the dissolution of traditional social structures, emphasizing the need for adequate recreational facilities to foster healthy development. They pointed out the limited opportunities for sports and cultural activities, stressing the importance of enhancing these from the grassroots level.

Regarding law enforcement, Shahnaz and Ashik highlighted the exploitation of juveniles by influential individuals manipulating legal frameworks. Firoz and Mortuza stressed the need to address legal loopholes and proactive intervention or "policing" to ensure social justice and maintain order. Whereas Kaiser mentioned two aspects of working with juveniles: (1) those who have not joined a gang but have the potential to join, and (2) those who are already involved. He added, *"we need a comprehensive social movement addressing juvenile gangs and gang culture where no one is left out. Families, educational institutions, professionals, and society as a whole must participate in this movement."*

In summary, preventing juvenile gang involvement requires a multi-faceted approach involving strong family guidance, supportive educational environments, community involvement, effective policing and comprehensive social movements. All segments of a juvenile's life, including family, school, peer, and social circles, need sincere, coordinated monitoring and facilitation to address this issue effectively (see, (Gilman et al., 2014; Gordon et al., 2004; Hesselink & Bougard, 2020; Hill et al., 2017; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Lenzi et al., 2015)).

## **5. Conclusion**

Juvenile gangs are structured groups with a subculture that deviates from conventional norms, providing members with identification and a sense of belonging through an alternative lifestyle. This gang culture incorporates separate ideals and practices, resulting in a parallel society with its own code of conduct that



prioritizes loyalty and solidarity among members. Juvenile gang activities have progressed from petty violations to more severe offenses such as property theft, extortion, mugging, drug use, fighting, and land grabs. This change tries to achieve economic stability while maintaining authority in their communities. Studies show a significant increase in both property crimes and violent acts. Several factors lead to gang involvement in violent acts, including the desire for status and respect, normalization of violence, drug abuse, easy access to firearms, and political patronage. This fosters a society that celebrates violence as a technique of gaining power and control. Juvenile gangs, which vary in size, usually have an organized hierarchy with strong leaders who use signs, symbols, and missions to establish their identity and presence in regions.

Investigations on why juveniles join gangs reveal motivations such as family financial issues, need for excitement, identity formation, protection, and camaraderie. These elements are linked to distinct risk dimensions identified by Thornberry's theoretical framework: individual, family, peer, school, and community. Individuals with poor self-esteem are more likely to join gangs, which is commonly driven by family or peers. Inadequate parental bonding and supervision, as well as a family history of criminal activity, increase this risk. Peer influence is important because juveniles who are estranged from their families and society frequently seek support from friends, which leads to gang affiliation. Community context is important; juveniles in high-crime regions normalize criminal behavior, and endorsement by community leaders enhances the possibility of gang involvement.

The study emphasizes the importance of coordinated measures to safeguard juveniles from gang culture. Families should be supportive, schools should give education and pleasant peer connections, and law enforcement should maintain safety. NGOs and civil society organizations should carry out specific activities, while the government should establish policies and allocate resources. Integrating these sectors' strengths can result in a more comprehensive approach to protecting adolescents from gangs and fostering safer neighborhoods.

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