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Bad Youth: The Effects of Family Dynamics and Political Patronage on Juvenile Gang Crime in Dhaka, Bangladesh

This study investigates the role of familial dynamics and political influences in shaping the emergence of adolescent gangs in Bangladesh, with particular attention to Dhaka. While earlier research has explored various dimensions of juvenile delinquency, limited attention has been given to how family conditions intersect with political patronage in fostering gang involvement. Drawing on qualitative case study research, the paper analyzes in-depth interviews with juvenile gang members, their parents, and police officials. The findings indicate that inadequate parental involvement, conflict-ridden family environments, and permissive parenting practices foster neglect and emotional vulnerability, driving adolescents to seek identity, belonging, and recognition within gangs. These risks are compounded by poverty and precarious living conditions. Simultaneously, political patronage and entrenched clientelist practices offer protection and incentives for young people to engage in gang-related violence, extortion, and local disputes. By drawing on rational choice theory, differential association theory, and the dynamics of patron–client politics, the study situates juvenile gang crime in Bangladesh within both familial and political structures. It argues that effective responses require comprehensive strategies that reinforce family support, limit political exploitation of youth, and address the commercialization of gang networks.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Family Dynamics, Juvenile Gang, Parenting, Political Patronage

Bad Youth: Die Auswirkungen familiärer Dynamiken und politischer Patronage auf Jugendbandenkriminalität in Dhaka, Bangladesch

Diese Studie untersucht die Rolle familiärer Dynamiken und politischer Einflüsse bei der Entstehung jugendlicher Banden in Bangladesch mit Schwerpunkt auf Dhaka. Frühere Forschung untersuchte verschiedene Dimensionen der Jugendkriminalität, vernachlässigte aber die Rolle von Familienverhältnissen und politischer Patronage. Anhand qualitativer Fallstudien analysiert der Artikel Tiefeninterviews mit jugendlichen Bandenmitgliedern, ihren Eltern und Polizeibeamt:innen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass mangelndes elterliches Engagement, konfliktreiche familiäre Umstände und permissive Erziehung zu Vernachlässigung emotionale Verletzlichkeit begünstigen und Jugendliche veranlassen, nach Identität, Zugehörigkeit und Anerkennung in Banden zu suchen. Diese Risiken werden durch Armut und prekäre Lebensbedingungen verstärkt. Gleichzeitig bieten politische Patronage und fest verankerte Klientelpraktiken jungen Menschen Anreize, sich an bandenmäßiger Gewalt, Erpressung und Konflikten zu beteiligen. Unter Rückgriff auf die Rational Choice Theorie, die Theorie der differentiellen Assoziation und die Dynamik der Patronagepolitik verortet die Studie Jugendbandenkriminalität in Bangladesch in familiären und politischen Strukturen. Es bedarf wirksamer Maßnahmen und umfassender Strategien, welche familiäre Unterstützung stärken, politische Ausbeutung von Jugendlichen einschränken und die Kommerzialisierung von Bandennetzwerken bekämpfen.

Keywords: Bangladesch, Erziehung, Familiäre Dynamik, Jugendbanden, Politische Patronage

1. Introduction

The escalation of criminal activities committed by juvenile gangs has emerged as a prominent concern in recent years, attracting considerable focus from policymakers, educators, and law enforcement authorities worldwide (Melde & Esbensen, 2013). Scholars frequently engage in debates regarding a singular definition of a youth gang, given that its characterization can vary significantly across different temporal and spatial contexts (Higginson et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the prevailing literature tends to define a gang as a group comprising 15 to 100 members, generally within the age range of 12 to 24 years. These members typically share a collective identity that is associated with distinct names, symbols, colors, or specific territories, whether physical or economic. Additionally, both the members themselves and external observers recognize the group as a gang, which is marked by a degree of permanence and organization, as well as involvement in elevated levels of criminal activity (Decker et al., 2013; Esbensen et al., 2001; Rodgers, 1999).

Dhaka, along with other major metropolitan areas of Bangladesh like Chittagong, Sylhet, Cumilla, and Barguna, has witnessed the presence of about 50 to 60 adolescent and juvenile gangs. These gangs collectively include a membership of over 5,000 teenagers (Uttom & Rozario, 2019). Juvenile gangs, such as the "Disco Boyz", "Nine Star", "Love Lane" and "Bangla Group" have grown significantly, frequently drawing more than 40 members (Rahman, 2019). The bulk of individuals participating in juvenile gangs were aged 14 to 19 years old (The Daily Star, 2022). The involvement of persons in illicit activities exhibits a wide array of behaviors, encompassing acts such as homicide, physical assault, intimidation, dangerous motorbike racing, and many forms of public disturbances (Rahman, 2019). There has not been much study done on the topic of gang crime among adolescents in Bangladesh (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017). The influence of family dynamics and political patronage on the rise of adolescent gang culture and their engagement in organized criminal activities in Bangladesh has received limited scholarly attention.

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining the agency of adolescents involved in juvenile gangs and criminal activities, with a particular focus on the interplay between family dynamics and political patronage in Dhaka City. It is guided by two central questions: (1) Which family-related factors contribute to juveniles' involvement in gangs? (2) How does political patronage influence the activities and persistence of juvenile gangs?

2. Literature Review

Several empirical investigations have discovered multiple risk indicators that have a significant capacity to accurately predict the likelihood of a young individual's engagement in a gang (Alleyne & Wood, 2014; García-Rojo et al., 2023; Glesmann et al., 2009; Higginson et al., 2018a). Adolescent gang membership is a complex phenomenon that stems from a combination of several factors, including individual, familial, peer, educational, and community settings (Hill et al., 1999). The complex array of elements that contribute to the engagement of young individuals in gangs has received much scholarly attention. Among these aspects, familial dynamics, specifically parenting styles, are of utmost importance (Hill et al., 2001). There is a clear indication that the engagement of adolescents in gangs tends to escalate in instances where there is familial participation in gang activities. This is particularly notable when siblings, cousins,

or other relatives are associated with gangs (Miller, 2001). Families that are dysfunctional and hostile and that experience disputes are more likely to engage in antisocial activities and become involved in gangs (Hoeve et al., 2009; Vigil, 1988). Teens who grow up in challenging environments frequently join gangs because they provide them with a sense of belonging and a surrogate family they lack at home (Morales, 1992; Ruble & Turner, 2000). In contrast, the existence of parental care and supervision has a substantial role in reducing these risks and hence fostering positive teenage development and mental wellness (Andersen et al., 2011; Deković & Meeus, 1997; Gray & Steinberg, 1999).

A definitive correlation exists between politics and crime (Shafi, 2010). Political conflict plays a significant part in this context since the upbringing of individuals in politically polarized areas often leads them to become involved in community defense, with community gangs serving as the primary means of doing this (Levy, 2009). In some sociocultural contexts, it is seen that males undergo a process of socialization, commencing prior to the age of 10, when they are encouraged to develop adverse views toward those affiliated with the opposing political party (Gayle, 2009b). Irrespective of the presence of immediate political motivations behind gang warfare, the enduring exposure to intense political polarization over one's career fosters the adoption of this method for resolving conflicts. Within this environment, affiliation with a gang provides individuals with a sense of assistance and the acquisition of a weapon for the purpose of self-defense during instances of violence. Moreover, this safeguard extends beyond gangs and encompasses law enforcement as well, as the latter does not command the confidence of all members of the community. The relationship between law enforcement agencies and some communities is primarily characterized by the occurrence of violent raids, with regular allegations of human rights violations (Gayle, 2009a; Moncrieffe, 1998).

3. Theoretical Argument

Understanding the involvement of adolescents in juvenile gangs requires an analytical framework that incorporates both micro-level decision-making and the broader social and political structures that shape those decisions. Classical criminological thought has long emphasized the rational capacities of human beings to weigh costs and benefits before committing an act, often conceptualized as the hedonistic calculus (Keel, 1997). Building on this tradition, rational choice perspectives argue that offenders assess risks relative to rewards when deciding to engage in criminal activity (Piquero & Hickman, 2002). For many adolescents in Dhaka, gang membership was perceived as rational, offering immediate economic gains, social recognition, and protection from law enforcement. Crucially, the perception of minimized risks, facilitated by political connections and the support of bara bhais, shifted the cost-benefit calculation in favor of delinquency. In this sense, rational choice theory illuminates how structural conditions, particularly political patronage, create environments where gang membership becomes not only attractive but also strategically advantageous for vulnerable youths.

While rational choice emphasizes decision-making, strain theory draws attention to the structural pressures that shape such decisions. Merton (1938) argued that when access to socially legitimate means of achieving culturally valued goals is blocked, individuals adapt through alternative strategies. Among his proposed modes of adaptation, "innovation" is particularly relevant to the present context. Many adolescents from economically disadvantaged families ex-

pressed aspirations for respect, financial stability, and social mobility, but faced limited opportunities due to poor educational attainment and restricted employment prospects. In these circumstances, joining gangs represented an "innovative" strategy to pursue legitimate cultural goals through illegitimate channels. Consistent with subsequent elaborations of strain theory (Featherstone & Deflem, 2003), the accounts of juvenile participants demonstrate how structural inequalities, combined with parental neglect, push adolescents toward deviant pathways when legitimate opportunities are foreclosed.

The processes by which adolescents are socialized into delinquency further resonate with Sutherland's (1972) Differential Association Theory, which emphasizes that criminal behavior is learned through social interactions. According to this framework, it is not the mechanisms of learning but the content of what is learned that differentiates conformity from deviance (Williams III & McShane, 2017). The interviews revealed that many juveniles were initiated into delinquent behavior by peers, older siblings, or neighborhood associates. Through repeated exposure to gang members, they acquired the values, techniques, and motivations that normalized violence and crime. This corresponds to Sutherland's proposition that delinquent definitions become dominant when they outweigh pro-social ones, and the frequency, intensity, and duration of such associations determine the strength of criminal learning (Vinney, 2019). In the Bangladeshi context, peer groups compensated for the absence of strong parental bonds, offering companionship, recognition, and training in criminal practices.

Beyond family and peer influences, the findings demonstrate that juvenile gangs in Dhaka are deeply embedded within the country's political and economic structures. Scholars of South Asia have long documented how patron–client networks mobilize vulnerable populations to serve partisan purposes, providing protection in exchange for loyalty (Hoque & Michelutti, 2018; Khan, 1998; Walters et al., 2021). Similarly, Villarreal (2002) illustrates how hierarchical political arrangements integrate violent actors into broader systems of control. The present study found that political leaders shielded juveniles from police intervention, supplied them with resources, and deployed them for electoral or partisan violence. This relationship institutionalized gang activity, embedding it within the logic of political competition. Moreover, as Harvey (2005, 2008) argues, processes of "accumulation by dispossession" intersect with these dynamics, whereby business elites and corrupt officials exploit vulnerable groups to secure land and expand commercial ventures. Accounts from participants revealed that adolescents were frequently mobilized for land grabbing and eviction activities, highlighting how political and economic elites capitalize on juvenile gangs for personal gain.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multi-layered explanation of juvenile gang crime in Dhaka, demonstrating that gang involvement is not merely the outcome of individual deviance but the result of interwoven family, social, and political structures that collectively shape the choices and opportunities available to youth.

4. Method and Materials

4.1. Approach

This research adopts an exploratory design, as the intersection of family dynamics and political patronage in shaping juvenile gang involvement has received little systematic attention in Bangladesh. Previous studies have explored related aspects, such as the exploitation of street

children within Mastaan-controlled crime networks (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017) or the organizational features and motivational factors of juvenile gangs (Hossain et al., 2024). Yet, these works do not directly examine how parenting practices interact with political protection to influence youth participation in gangs. As Elman et al. (2020) emphasize, exploratory research is particularly suitable for contexts where phenomena remain under-theorized, as it enables the generation of new insights and the identification of causal linkages for future inquiry. In this study, the exploratory approach thus provides a framework for investigating how familial dysfunction and political patronage converge to shape patterns of juvenile gang crime in Dhaka. This qualitative study (Cresswell, 2013) employs a case study approach to develop a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the effects of parenting and political patronage behind juvenile gang crime. The design featured in-depth interviews (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) with 15 selected teenagers to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of their viewpoints behind their involvement in juvenile gangs. The interviews were semi-structured (Harrell & Bradley, 2009), allowing for a guided yet flexible conversation. Participants were asked about their family background, relationships with their parents, experiences in their local community, and any interactions or benefits they may have had due to political patronage.

Interviews were also conducted with the juvenile gang members' parents. The objective was to gain insight into their perspectives on parenting methods, their child's behavior, and any potential influence from local politics or patronage. Local police officers were also interviewed to glean any insights they might have regarding the gang members, especially in relation to political patronage. This design aimed to explore the reasons behind juvenile gang formation and further committing various violent activities, exploring the family factors, especially parenting styles and political factors. The semi-structured interview included a "funneling technique" that enables the conversation to move smoothly from general topics to more specialized ones (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). This design was implemented because it offered the possibility of providing structure and generating rich data while also preserving consistency throughout the interviews.

4.2.   Participant Recruitment

To ensure our participants had familiarity with the juveniles' involvement in gangs and committing crimes, researchers developed the following inclusion criteria. Participants needed to:

1. **Juvenile Gang Members**: Juveniles who were previously involved with gangs and had formal complaints reported against them in police stations. These individuals were either warned, arrested, or underwent criminal justice. Teenage gang members aged 12 to 18 were purposively selected, as this age range aligns with the legal definition of juveniles in Bangladesh youth (Dewan, 2021) are most susceptible to gang involvement, ensuring the collection of relevant insights.
2. **Parents of Juvenile Gang Members**: Parents of those juvenile gang members whose children were warned, arrested, or went through the criminal justice procedure.
3. **Police Officials**: Police officials who previously handled or worked with juvenile gang violence cases.

The researchers recruited a total of 35 participants, comprising 15 juvenile gang members, 10 parents of these juveniles, and 10 police officials. Participants were selected using a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods. Juvenile gang members were

selected using the snowball sampling method (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Initially, researchers reached out to police officials, briefed them about the research, and then, with their assistance, contacted juvenile gang members who had registered complaints against them. The parents of juvenile gang members and the police officials were selected through purposive sampling (Acharya et al., 2013) to ensure the participation of people with actual knowledge and pertinent experiences connected to the adolescents' involvement in gang activities. Their willingness to take part in interviews was another important factor that was considered during the selection process. The study has chosen the Mirpur area of Dhaka City, Bangladesh, as the location for data collection because it is a hotspot for juvenile gang activities, with many juvenile gangs based in this area. In the initial phase of the research process, the researchers collaborated with the local police department to reach out to the respondents. The collaboration was instrumental in identifying suitable juvenile gang members who fit the study criteria. Recognizing the potential challenges of engaging this demographic, the police played a pivotal role in facilitating the connection and building trust, thus ensuring the juveniles were more receptive to participating in the study.

Engaging juvenile gang members posed notable challenges. During the initial encounters, many were reluctant to participate and avoided sensitive topics. To overcome this, the researchers invested the first two to three meetings solely in rapport-building, engaging participants in informal conversations and sharing tea without posing critical questions (Schmid et al., 2024). This gradual trust-building process helped create a safe space and reassured participants that the study was strictly academic, with full confidentiality guaranteed. Once confidence was established, gang members became more open, and in several cases, they themselves facilitated access to their parents. The researchers ensured that the selection of parents was directly associated with the consenting juvenile participants, maintaining an ethical approach throughout the process. Interviews were then systematically conducted with these parents to gather their unique perspectives and experiences. The final sample demographics encompass dual-parent households, single-parent households, individuals from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, and metropolitan areas. While the researchers aimed to have a diverse sample group, the selection of participants was contingent upon their voluntary agreement to take part in the study, and all 35 individuals willingly accepted to participate.

4.3. Interview Schedule

Before conducting the interviews, researchers obtained explicit verbal agreement from the respondents in person (Brod & Feinbloom, 1990). The interviews had a duration of around one hour and were conducted by the researchers. Before each interview, participants were explicitly advised of their prerogative to terminate the interview at any point without incurring any repercussions (Josselson, 2007). Each interview was conducted separately. After the first briefing and receiving consent, the researchers conducted an interview using open-ended questions (Turner III, 2010) from a semi-structured questionnaire to explore the descriptions and understandings of our participants. This facilitated the ability to ask a variety of questions throughout the interview. The researchers asked follow-up questions during the interviews to ensure clarity and consistency of responses.

The interviews were done in the participants' native Bengali language to ensure the participants understood the questions and gave accurate responses. After each interview, the researchers conducted a debriefing session with the participants and inquired if they had any inquiries. Upon completion of the interview, the researchers preserved the audio recording and transcribed the interview word-for-word.

4.4. Data Analysis

After completing the interviews, the first and second authors transcribed the data in the original Bengali language and then translated it into English. The researchers held debriefing sessions among themselves to share the data and verify its accuracy by cross-checking the transcriptions with the recordings. The translations were then subjected to a thorough verification process, and the relevant details were condensed into a summary. The researchers employed thematic analysis to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). To interpret the data collected from the interviews, all authors read the translated data multiple times, aligning it with the research questions. After reading the translations of the transcriptions, the researchers coded and categorized the data (Saldana, 2021). The researchers used pseudonyms and adhered to other criteria to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the data received from participants.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants followed the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments (Riis, 2003). In qualitative research, establishing trustworthiness necessitates researchers to demonstrate credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Jones et al., 2013; Morrow, 2005). To enhance trustworthiness in this study, researchers employed the member-checking technique. They contacted the respondents again after the initial data interpretation. The researchers showed the transcripts and explained the data analysis to all respondents to ensure that their narratives and explanations were accurately captured. This process validated the data and its interpretation (Cresswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Throughout this manuscript, the researchers have meticulously documented the inquiry process, as well as the methods employed for data collection and analysis.

5. Results

5.1. Parental Absence

Participants expressed their sentiments regarding the emotional repercussions stemming from the absence of their parents. Individuals experienced feelings of solitude and perceived themselves as being forsaken or disregarded. One of the participants said:

> "For as long as I can remember, my parents have either been busy working or have been completely absent. So, I've had to make the streets my temporary home." (Participant 6, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

Children are subject to significant mental and emotional development setbacks when their parents are not physically present in their everyday experiences. As a result, individuals had a strong inclination to seek external means to develop a feeling of belonging and validation. The anecdotes elicited a deep want for guidance, tactile connection, or just verbal communication – the essential elements of the parent-child bond that were conspicuously lacking in their encounters. One of the participants remarked:

> "Emotionally, both of my parents were not present at all, even though they were physically present. Within the boundaries of my own home, I felt secluded and lonely." (Participant 11, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

The participants exhibit a palpable perception of disregard encountered by a substantial portion of the population. One participant effectively conveyed this feeling with articulate expression:

> "It's not that I was interested in becoming a member of a gang in the first place. All I wanted was for someone to pay attention to me and care about what I had to say. I received a bunch of them in the gang." (Participant 5, Juvenile gang Member, Mirpur)

The participants conveyed that the prevailing sensation of emptiness they encountered was not solely ascribed to the lack of visibility within their households. This serves to underscore the significant psychological anguish that numerous adolescents endure, prompting them to seek comfort in gangs that offer a semblance of recognition. After a more thorough analysis of the collected data, it becomes evident that various aspects converge to produce this sense of indifference. The restricted possibilities for considerable contact between parents and their children sometimes arise from the economic constraints many people face, such as the need to work several jobs or prolonged hours. As one of the participants said:

> "I always saw my father deeply involved in his job at a textile company near Mirpur-12, working tirelessly throughout the day to provide us with a comfortable life. Similarly, my mother skillfully handles two demanding household responsibilities. Despite admiring their dedication, I often felt emotionally isolated, as my academic achievements and daily challenges went unnoticed amid their busy routines, leaving me feeling detached from their world." (Participant 15, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

The existence of cultural norms that restrict the display of emotions may result in a scarcity of open communication within family settings for some individuals. In some instances, parents who have had minimal emotional validation throughout their formative years possess insufficient abilities to provide sufficient emotional support. When lacking a nurturing environment at home, adolescents are often attracted to gangs because of the attention and sense of belonging they fervently seek. One of the participants said:

> "In traditional Bengali society, expressing one's sentiments is often considered as a sign of weakness. This is a cultural norm that has to change. During our family gatherings, both of my parents consistently projected an image of resilience, while simultaneously choosing to withhold their emotions as well as their feelings." (Participant 10, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

Participants consistently expressed profound dissatisfaction, frustration, and feeling overwhelmed, largely due to a lack of support from significant family members. They described families that were either unaware of their responsibilities or indifferent to the crucial task of

preparing children for future challenges. This absence of guidance and support left individuals struggling through life's challenges alone, recalling emotionally impactful memories of crucial moments when they yearned for advice, encouragement, and recognition of their achievements. One of the participants said:

> "My parents encouraged me to pursue whatever it was that made my heart happy, but they never showed me how to get there. They rarely seemed to acknowledge anything I did as being successful. They were always quick to condemn me for the most insignificant of my actions." (Participant 2, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

Another participant said:

> "I found myself in a situation where I had to independently determine moral decisions without any other person's guidance or support." (Participant 7, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

5.2. Parental Behaviors and Attitudes

The responses obtained from the in-depth interviews (IDI) provide insight into the psychological strain experienced by adolescents due to marital conflict of their parents, hence impacting their mental well-being. When faced with internal conflicts among their close family members, these adolescent people often experience emotional difficulties marked by instability, susceptibility, and mental fatigue. In the context of emotionally distraught teenagers, it may be seen that the exterior world, despite its inherent hazards, seems to provide a sanctuary when contrasted with their turbulent family circumstances. Street alliances sometimes function as conduits to deeper affiliations, especially with juvenile gangs within the immediate vicinity. A reflection from a participant captures this sentiment:

> "My father's extramarital affair often led to quarrels with my mother, and my father used to beat her every night. Every day when I see my parents arguing, I get emotionally weak. Since then, I have spent most of my time outside the home. Some of the friends I used to hang out with in the area were associated with local teen gangs. Those friends of mine included me in their gang." (Participant 1, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

Authoritarian parenting is distinguished by elevated levels of expectation and regulation, along with a deficiency in transparent and genuine communication, leading to a constrictive and repressive environment for youngsters. Within the context of this specific parenting style, teenagers have a perception of restriction because of the cultural norms and anticipations that are enforced upon them by their parents. This constraint hampers their capacity, leading to less independence in expressing their thoughts, understanding complex topics, and fostering significant affiliations with gangs. One of the participants said:

> "In the confines of our domestic abode, I found myself unable to effectively communicate my thoughts and opinions. Each sentence, together with every emotion, functioned as an explicit command. I had the perception that I was a marionette, doing actions following their capricious desires." (Participant 4, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

Disregarding parental instructions results in further instances of physical torment, hence intensifying the overall painful encounter. One of the participants said:

> "In instances of noncompliance, my parents used strict punishments, mostly consisting of confining me to my room. I often faced reprimands and harsh criticism from them, even for minor transgressions. A blunder evolved into something more than simply a blunder; it became a memory that was etched into bruises." (Participant 8, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

The presence of violence not only leads to observable bodily harm but also induces significant psychological distress, hence intensifying a child's desire to seek comfort outside of their home environment. The consequences of this harmful relationship may be classified into two separate dimensions: a deep-seated discontentment coupled with an increasing propensity towards rebellion. One of the participants said:

> "A raging fire was stoked up inside of me with each and every command that was imparted and blow that was dealt. The fire demonstrated a powerful yearning for freedom, a need to overcome challenges, and a tendency to let forth a resounding shout whenever it did so." (Participant 6, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

Amidst the prevailing internal turmoil, gangs emerge as an unlikely refuge of security. These entities provide individuals with a space in which they might experience acceptance, a certain degree of influence, and, curiously, a feeling of inclusion. One of the participants said:

> "My friends from the neighborhood were the only ones who, in contrast to my parents, genuinely understood and felt the pain that I was going through. In contrast to how I was treated by members of my family, I had a profound sense of life and significance whenever I was hanging out with my friends and their respective gangs." (Participant 12, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

Another aspect of gang affiliation is the potential for upward mobility within the organization, enabling individuals to ascend to higher positions of authority and influence. One of the participants put it:

> "I gradually ascended the hierarchical structure of the gang and had a pivotal role in the decision-making process. I transitioned from experiencing a lack of power within my domestic environment to developing a perception of personal autonomy." (Participant 3, juvenile gang member, Mirpur*)*

Furthermore, the affiliation linked to gang membership serves as a means for these adolescents to recover from their shattered emotional well-being and diminished self-worth. One of the participants said:

> "When I was outdoors, they trembled in terror of me and acknowledged my authority. I was no longer the quiet kid; rather, I had matured into someone who deserved to be regarded seriously." (Participant 14, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

Nevertheless, the inadvertent repercussions of a certain approach to parenting are characterized by the availability of ample material resources without the necessary direction and establishment of limits. This kind of parenting, although motivated by affection and the intention to provide their kid with many resources, seems to cultivate changes in behavior, tendencies towards involvement in gangs, and future engagement in criminal behaviors. One of the interviewees shared:

> "My love for Manik (pseudonym), my only kid, led me to fulfill all his demands despite our struggles. Before finishing school, he convinced me to buy him a smartphone and later a camera for

content creation. I refrained from interfering, thinking I was giving him space, but his behavior changed significantly, leading to many conflicts. Even more concerning were the stories that started to surface of him harassing female students. Claims surfaced that he, along with his group, attempted to forcefully remove girls from their families under his whims. These claims are disturbing. When he tried to perform Sindoor (Vermilion) on a young girl who was still in school, we were forced to deal with some very terrible ramifications. This was one of the most upsetting incidents that occurred." (Participant 24, Parent of a juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

Additionally, responses to IDIs show a worrying trend: adolescents are not only influenced by the unlawful behaviors they see their parents engage in; they are also sometimes participating in them with their parents' active encouragement. More concerningly, our results imply situations in which for these young people the distinction between participant and spectator is blurred, with parents taking an active part. A participant described a terrifying incident, stating:

"During my time here, I've witnessed a lot of crimes, but very few of them have stayed with me like the murder that was perpetrated by two brothers when they were just teenagers. The fact that their mother was not only there but also supporting them in the act is more difficult to comprehend." (Participant 31, Police Officer, Mirpur)

Additionally exacerbating this matter is the parental reaction after the occurrence of a crime. Contrary to reprimanding or providing guidance to children for atonement, our investigation indicates that these parents often try to protect their young ones from facing the repercussions of their behaviors. One of the participants said:

"It's a trend that keeps repeating itself: parents either helping their children escape or fabricating alibis for them. Their homes, which ought to be the foundations of values in their lives, have instead become hiding places for misbehavior." (Participant 33, Police Officer, Mirpur)

5.3.   Challenging Living Circumstances

Adverse living conditions, such as impoverished circumstances and inadequate parental care, especially within the socio-economic framework of Bangladesh, have a substantial effect in propelling young individuals towards involvement in gang associations and precipitating their entry into the precarious realm of criminal activities. Within this particular context, the decision of young individuals to explore the streets might be seen as more of a response driven by desperation for survival rather than a voluntary choice. Within the context of survival, the delineation between social norms of morality might become ambiguous. One of the participants said:

"I was unable to eat three times a day most of the time. Therefore, I became a member of the gang because they promised to pay me between 100 and 250 Taka per day. I can now eat three times a day, at least." (Participant 1, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

Many individuals are drawn to informal work sectors, seeking economic advancement. Though these jobs provide income, they often lack the protections of formal industries, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation. This environment sees frequent salary manipulation and verbal and physical abuse. For many, gangs offer a refuge, providing a sense of belonging, security, and

independence amid the persistent mistreatment. The psychological and physical toll of such exploitation makes gang life appealing to these vulnerable young individuals. One of the participants said:

> "My father couldn't support our family of four alone, so I went to Dhaka to find work. I got a job as a Leguna (one kind of public transport) helper, earning 100 Taka per day. I soon clashed with the driver, who insulted and threatened me. At the end of the work, I was told to go to many places with him. He used to beat and abuse me with vulgar language if I refused to go with him. Exhausted and mistreated, I turned to drugs, misbehaved with passengers, and fought often. Eventually, I quit, started controlling younger helpers, and formed my own gang with them." (Participant 7, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

5.4.   Exposure to Political Patronage

The interviews conducted with these young individuals consistently unveiled a prevailing perception of empowerment and privilege that they ascribed to their political affiliations. For instance, a significant proportion of individuals emphasized the significance of these connections in conferring upon them the power to intervene, negotiate, or even dictate the resolutions of local disputes, often exhibiting a bias towards their interests or those of their acquaintances. One of the participants said:

> "It was known throughout the community that Shakil(pseudonym) was responsible for instigating the altercation that occurred last month. However, due to his influential political affiliations, local law enforcement officials refrained from initiating any form of inquiry or interrogation." (Participant 12, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

The sense of advantage was not exclusively limited to conflicts. As statements made by both law enforcement officials and members of criminal groups, the presence of political patronage frequently provided a protective cover for these young individuals, ostensibly granting them immunity from legal repercussions and safeguarding them from facing the consequences of their serious transgressions. The influence of political alignment is also demonstrated through a widespread atmosphere of power and coercion. One of the participants narrates:

> "In our local community, having a personal connection with a politician grants an individual an impervious status. In several instances, individuals within my social circle have effectively settled challenging circumstances by merely invoking the identities of local political figures." (Participant 14, juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

People exercised caution when interacting with politically affiliated adolescents, recognizing their influence. Testimonies from parents and juveniles revealed that these youths often controlled community resources due to their political ties. This portrays adolescent gang members as both beneficiaries of political patronage and as individuals who inspire admiration and fear. They demonstrate their affiliations by participating in local activities, attracting leaders seeking grassroots influence. After committing transgressions, some juveniles seek legal protection by expressing loyalty to political figures, highlighting the symbiotic link between gangs and political patronage in Bangladesh.

5.5.   Nexus between Political Culture and Juvenile Gang Crimes

The replies obtained from the IDIs demonstrated that political leaders are responsible for nurturing and capitalizing on these criminal groups. The participants emphasized the proactive engagement of leaders, particularly those affiliated with dominant political parties, in the identification and enlistment of susceptible adolescents, leveraging their susceptibilities for strategic purposes. Upon initiation, a hierarchical structure is developed, wherein the leader plays a paternalistic position, exposing these young individuals to a range of unlawful behaviors. One of the participants said:

> "Currently, within the grassroots political sphere of Bangladesh, the use of violence has become a prominent indicator of power within field-level politics. The more one's inclination toward violence, the more formidable their prowess becomes. The higher his rank in politics, the greater the level of respect he elicits." (Participant 28, Police Officer, Mirpur)

Paradoxically, these leaders subsequently adopt the role of saviors, intervening to mitigate the consequences faced by the young individuals who were coerced into criminal activities, thereby further strengthening their loyalty. One of the participants' statements encapsulates:

> "In certain instances, compelling evidence may exist implicating certain gang members; nonetheless, directives from superiors explicitly indicate that certain individuals are exempt from investigation or prosecution. It is widely known that these criminal groups enjoy the support and reinforcement of a few particular political figures." (Participant 32, Police Officer, Mirpur)

These gangs are effectively utilized as instruments of political influence, engaging in various activities such as participating in rallies and directly employing intimidation tactics against opposition groups. This positioning has solidified their status as a powerful entity, operating with the support and protection of their political patrons. One of the participants said:

> "Approximately six months ago, on the eve of a political strike, some middle-aged guys started looking for young adolescents in our slum. Kamal (pseudonym) and Mizanur (pseudonym), who are recognized individuals associated with the local teen gang, were approached and instructed to gather the remaining members. The individuals expressed their want for large bags containing bricks and offered a remuneration of 50 Taka for each sack. The individuals expressed a desire for the bricks to be forcefully thrown at the vehicles during the walkout. Additionally, it was mentioned that a picket would take place in Mirpur the next morning. To incentivize participation, they offered an additional 50 Taka and a serving of biryani to everyone." (Participant 27, Parent of a juvenile gang member, Mirpur)

The process of recruiting individuals into criminal activities, afterward providing them with security, serves to reinforce their allegiance to political clients and sustains the prevalence of juvenile gang crime within the political landscape of Bangladesh.

5.6.   Commercial Exploitation of Juvenile Gangs

The IDI responses reveal the deceptive tactics employed by politicians and influential corporate executives to utilize adolescent gangs for economic profit and influence. These gangs serve as instruments for imposing a system of coercion on vulnerable sections of society, including hawkers, rickshaw pullers, and smaller informal businesses. These operations are not limited

to a certain area; several influential gang leaders, even when in prison or living in another country, continue to control local extortion schemes by employing juvenile gangs as their primary enforcers. Traders in these neighborhoods, which are controlled by gangs, frequently become trapped in a never-ending cycle of extortion. One of the participants said:

> "The most dangerous criminals in Dhaka are extorting citizens by phone while hiding in overseas countries. They target new business owners, landowners, returning foreigners, dish traders, and the wealthy, issuing death threats and demanding large payments. Fear of retaliation prevents many victims from reporting to authorities." (Participant 33, Police Officer, Mirpur)

In addition to extortion, exploitation extends to real estate. Grandiose projects for the wealthy are backed by a harsh reality. With the push to build model towns and housing complexes, land occupied by slum dwellers becomes a prime target. Entrepreneurs, especially in real estate, use adolescent gangs to achieve their goals. These gangs intimidate and forcibly evict impoverished residents, clearing the way for new constructions. This reveals a troubling link between political favoritism, financial ambitions, and the manipulation of young gangs, illustrating the lengths those in power will go to consolidate wealth and control. One of the participants recounted:

> "Recently, a disturbing incident occurred where Arman (pseudonym) was brutally murdered in broad daylight in Pallabi, Mirpur, witnessed by his child. The child observed the horrible deed perpetrated by members of a local juvenile gang. Further investigation revealed an even more alarming fact: the orchestrator of this heinous act was not just a rival but a former Member of Parliament with significant commercial interests in the area." (Participant 29, Police Officer, Mirpur)

6. Discussion

This qualitative study reported young people's reasons for joining juvenile gangs and behavioral development with a broad view of how family dynamics and political patronage could influence their life trajectories in Dhaka. This study used six major crime-enhancing themes that were strongly related to family dynamics and political patronage: parental absence and neglect, parental behaviors and attitudes, challenging living circumstances, exposure to political patronage, nexus between political culture and Juvenile gang crimes, and commercial exploitation of juvenile gangs. The findings indicate that juvenile delinquency in Dhaka is not an isolated behavioral problem, but a structured process influenced by rational calculations, social strain, learned behaviors, and exploitative political economies, aligning with and extending existing criminological scholarship.

The study revealed that parental absence and lack of emotional support significantly shaped young individuals' pathways into gang involvement. Juveniles consistently described feeling neglected due to their parents' physical absence or emotional unavailability, which created a void in their need for guidance, validation, and belonging. This aligns with prior studies that link parental disengagement to youth delinquency (Danisworo & Wangid, 2022; Surong & Lyngdoh, 2020). Economic pressures often exacerbated this dynamic, as parents preoccupied with survival were emotionally inaccessible to their children (Kencana et al., 2020). Additionally, cultural norms that discourage open emotional expression further deepened this discon-

nect (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Parker et al., 2012). Unlike earlier research that primarily emphasizes parental neglect, this study shows how such absence interacts with peer influence and community environments, making juveniles more receptive to the solidarity offered by gangs. In line with differential association theory, the absence of parental guidance created a vacuum that was filled by peer groups, where deviant values and behaviors were normalized (Sutherland et al., 1992). As a result, gangs became an alternative source of companionship, validation, and emotional support (Van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo, 2021).

The study also highlighted how household conflict and toxic parenting contribute to juveniles' vulnerability to gang involvement. Frequent quarrels, harsh discipline, and ineffective communication created an atmosphere of psychological strain, pushing many youths to seek emotional refuge in external associations such as gangs (Kim & Kim, 2008; Van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo, 2021). Toxic parenting, characterized by unrealistic expectations and punitive responses to deviation, often resulted in both physical and psychological harm (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2006; Vuk, 2017). This resonates with strain theory, as the gap between parental demands and the youths' limited means of fulfillment generated frustration that was channeled into delinquent subcultures (Featherstone & Deflem, 2003). For many respondents, gangs provided validation, empowerment, and companionship otherwise absent in their households. While some parents attempted to compensate for neglect through material provision, the absence of consistent boundaries further reinforced deviant behavior. Alarmingly, a few cases revealed instances where parents themselves encouraged youth participation in unlawful activities, illustrating how family environments may not only fail to prevent delinquency but actively legitimize it (Alduraywish, 2021; Ang et al., 2018; Maghsoudi et al., 2018; Rathinabalan & Naaraayan, 2017).

The study further demonstrated that poverty and socioeconomic marginalization are critical drivers of youth gang affiliation in Bangladesh. Respondents described how limited opportunities in the formal economy pushed them toward informal sectors, where exploitation through wage discrepancies and mistreatment was commonplace (Shong et al., 2019). Such structural disadvantages illustrate what Merton described as a state of anomie, in which culturally prescribed goals, such as economic success and social recognition, remain unattainable through legitimate means. In this context, many adolescents resorted to "innovation", pursuing these goals through alternative, often illicit avenues, including gang involvement. Gangs, therefore, emerged as attractive sanctuaries, offering not only protection and financial benefits but also a sense of unity and empowerment otherwise unavailable to these marginalized youths (Hagedorn, 2008). These findings underscore how structural inequalities, rather than individual moral failings, propel adolescents toward deviance, challenging conventional notions of delinquency as merely a product of personal choice.

The study shows that political associations in Bangladesh significantly empower juvenile gang members by reshaping both their social standing and their perception of risk. Through political patronage, these youths acquired the ability to exert influence over local conflicts, securing outcomes aligned with their own or their allies' interests (Leslie, 2010). More critically, such affiliations often granted them de facto legal impunity, insulating them from serious charges or long-term consequences (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017). This dynamic illustrates rational choice principles: gang members perceived the benefits of political protection as outweighing the potential costs of arrest or punishment, thereby reinforcing their decision to engage in

crime (Pyrooz et al., 2024). These associations also provided symbolic power, as political backing conferred an aura of authority and deterrence, making community members reluctant to challenge or resist them.

The study further revealed how political leaders, particularly those affiliated with dominant parties, exploited the vulnerabilities of adolescents by recruiting and indoctrinating them into unlawful activities. Once integrated into these networks, juveniles were socialized into criminal roles through repeated exposure to political leaders and senior gang members, reflecting the mechanisms of differential association where deviant values are transmitted through close interactions (Sutherland, 1972). After initiating them into such activities, these leaders paradoxically assumed protective roles, shielding the adolescents from legal or social repercussions. This dual process of indoctrination and protection fostered deep loyalty, effectively transforming gangs into instruments of political mobilization, used in demonstrations and the intimidation of opposition groups (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017; Luqman, 2010; Ruud, 2014; Villarreal, 2002).

The study also revealed a complex network of exploitation in which politicians and commercial elites mobilized adolescent gangs to consolidate economic power and territorial control. These youths frequently acted as enforcers, extracting money from economically vulnerable populations and assisting in illegal land acquisitions that displaced underprivileged groups (Leslie, 2010; Musa & Rais, 2023). Despite being physically removed from day-to-day operations, gang leaders-maintained authority by delegating extortion and intimidation to minors. This dynamic reflects Harvey's notion of "accumulation by dispossession," whereby wealth and property are concentrated in the hands of elites through coercion and displacement, often facilitated by informal actors. In this context, juvenile gangs functioned as intermediaries in broader processes of political-economic exploitation, linking grassroots delinquency to systemic structures of corruption and urban inequality (Harvey, 2005, 2008).

7. Conclusion

This study has illuminated many crucial aspects that impact the involvement of young people in gang activities, with specific emphasis placed on parental and political issues. The primary factors contributing to this issue are the absence of parental participation and the display of bad parental behavior. These factors underscore the crucial influence that family has on a juvenile's decision-making process. The already tenuous status of these young individuals is exacerbated by difficult living conditions. When exposed to the impact of political leaders and a detrimental political culture, these young individuals become susceptible to being influenced and drawn into a life of criminal activities. Moreover, our study has revealed a troubling pattern: Adolescent gangs are not operating independently but are frequently manipulated by external business interests. These interested parties take advantage of the gangs, further involving the young individuals in illegal activity. Effectively addressing the problem of youth gang crime extends beyond simply correcting individual behavior. A complete strategy is necessary, which includes strengthening family ties, changing the existing political culture, and reducing economic exploitation. Only by a comprehensive and varied strategy can we expect to steer these young people away from criminal activities and direct them towards more productive and beneficial lives. However, a notable limitation of this study lies in its geographical focus on a densely populated urban setting characterized by its own distinct social dynamics and

patterns of gang activity. As a result, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other contexts, particularly rural areas, where parenting styles, community structures, political influence, and youth behavior can differ significantly. The dynamics of gang formation and political patronage in rural settings may present unique challenges not captured in this study, underscoring the need for future research in more diverse geographical and socio-cultural environments.

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