

Characteristics of urban youth gang culture in the city of Colombo

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Youth gang culture is a social phenomenon that has turned into a critical social issue in the modern world. In Sri Lanka, criminal offences and related antisocial action have been identified as extreme social problems causing tremendous amount of threats to the general public in the city of Colombo, as well as in the rural geographies. Except for the seldom studies conducted on deviant behaviour of street children, there aren't comprehensive studies done on gang culture in Sri Lanka. The general beliefs on characteristics of gang culture are basically built on assumptions and rumors. Thus the findings of this research reveal the characteristics of youth gangs and reasons which attract Sri Lankan youth to the gang culture. 493 gang members identified from 75 gangs operational in 14 GN Divisions in the city of Colombo participated in this study. The information was gathered through a questioner survey, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation, case studies and information collected from the Police and other institutions. Data and information have being carefully analyzed in numerous ways to arrive at the findings, conclusion and recommendations. Research findings revealed that youth are influenced to join gangs for freedom (81%), protection (92%), friendship (100%), income (83%), drug usage/sexual needs. All the gang members under purview were addicted to substance usage and involved in criminal activities. Peer group association and, income generation through illegal means, substance usage, drug trafficking, crime, prostitution are the main characteristics of the gang culture. One important behavioral pattern of youth male gangs is that loyal gang members follow a gang-defined system of rules, rituals, and codes of behavior. Gangs serve some individuals as a substitute family structure. Gangs are in different types, characteristics of those gangs vary upon the type. Number of gang members in a gang depends on the nature of the gang and its sub-culture.

Key Words: Anti-Social Behavior, Characteristics, Gang Culture in Colombo, Crime, Urban Youth