GANGSTERISM AMONG TEENAGERS IN MALAYSIA

Alagappar, P., Len, C.W., George, M., Lee, A.S.H., and Wong, M.S.H.
School of Communication
Taylor’s College Petaling Jaya,
A4-102, Level 1, Block A4,
Leisure Commerce Square
9, Jalan PJS 8/9,
46150 Petaling Jaya, Malaysia.

Abstract: Crime and violence in schools is threatening the well-being of the young people in Malaysia. Despite national’s efforts to restore a culture of learning and teaching, incidents of gansterism, theft, vandalism, burglary, rape and even murder are reported on school grounds. In a study on “Gangsterism Among Secondary School” by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Crime Prevention Foundation of Malaysia reported that serious misconduct exhibited by secondary schools is primarily influenced by gangsters. Gangstersism activities pose a threat to the education system and to all stages of the teaching and learning processes.

The objective of this research is to find out the 1) profile of membership of gang’s that these teenagers join; 2) profile of students who are susceptible joiners of gangs and 3) to investigate the reasons for participation. The outcome is to propose suggestions to curb and curtail this social issue.

1. INTRODUCTION

Crime and violence in schools is threatening the well-being of the young people in Malaysia. Despite national’s efforts to restore a culture of learning and teaching, incidents of gansterism, theft, vandalism, burglary, rape and even murder are reported on school grounds. Before we delve into the issue gansterism, let’s try to make a distinction between gangs and gansterism. Gangs are not necessarily bad but gansterism invariably is. According to the Oxford dictionary, the term “Gangsters” can be described as - A member of a group of violent criminals and Gansterism can be described as the use of tactics associated with gangsters, as intimidation or violence, in order to achieve something.

The gansterism issue in Malaysia is a hot topic as gansterism has been reported frequently by the media in Malaysia. In a study on “gansterism among secondary school” by the ministry of education in collaboration with the Crime Prevention Foundation of Malaysia reported that serious misconduct exhibited by secondary schools is primarily influenced by gangsters. The study also indicated that students participate in gansterism because of three main factors- family, living environment, and academic achievement. The Royal Malaysian Police Force on the other hand has classified students who participate in gansterism into three categories- triad gangs, thug’s gangs and school hooligans.

Gansterism "contaminates" the school environment and jeopardizes the educational process. There can be serious long-standing effect such as physical, emotional and psychological implications for both teachers and pupils including: distress, reduced self-esteem, risk of depression and suicide, reduced school attendance, impaired concentration, fear and a diminished ability to learn. (WHO, 1997). Not only do gangsters’ activities pose a threat to the core business of the ministry of education, but also the teaching and learning process is also hindered by such practices.

As a social phenomenon, it is important to know that gansterism is not confined merely to the lower rungs of modern society. Indeed, it occupies much of the ‘high moral ground’ and has political dimensions that reach well beyond the local neighbourhood (Buckley 2005).
Sociologists portray modern gangs as the outcome of certain social circumstances such as unemployment, poverty and lack of self-esteem, which is a controversial and disputable statement. They operate as mini-communities with their own hierarchies and create a sense of belonging amongst youth in particular. To solve the problem of gangs, they say, you must find solutions to the socio-economic problems of our society (Buckley 2005). However, this argument does not explain why youth from middle and upper-class homes join gangs and commit crime. It does not explain the self esteem and status given to gangs by young people who are materially well-off.

In this research, the researchers aim to examine the internal psychological process that prompted people into joining gangsterism by conducting in-depth interviews. At the mean time, the researchers will be looking into some aspects of the causes, effect and creation of gangsterism as well as some of the responses of communities towards gangsterism issue in Malaysia.

2. RESEARCH AIMS

According to www.dictionary.com, a teenager can be defined as - a person between the ages of 13 and 19; an adolescent.

The objective of this research is
1. To find out the profile membership of gang’s that these teenagers join.
2. To find out the profile of students who are susceptible joiners of gang
3. To investigate the reasons for participation.

In addition, the researchers will be figuring how social influence plays a role in impacting the teenagers. Lastly, the researchers will also examine the responses of communities towards gangsterism while recommending and suggesting an array of productive strategies that can engage educators, parents and communities in an effort to curb and curtail this social issue.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this research, the researchers have conducted in-depth interviews with:
- The Chief Inspector of Subang Jaya, Inspector Ooi and
- 3 former gangsters

Lastly, the researchers have conducted a focus group interview on 12 Taylor’s College Mass Communication students aged between 17-21.

Here are the questions proposed to the interviewees:

3.1 Questions for Focus Group:
1. In your own words, what does gangsterism means?
2. What is your general perception towards gangsters and gangsterism?
3. Have you been confronted by gangsters? If yes, tell us your experience(s)
4. In your perception, who are the teenagers that are susceptible to join gangsterism?
5. What are the reason(s) that prompt teenagers into joining gangsterism?
6. In your opinion, what sorts of activities do you associate gangsters with?
7. In your opinion, what are your suggestion(s) in curbing and curtailing this issue?
8. Do you think the gangsters should be given a second chance in our society? If yes, why? If no, why?
9. Have you ever considered of joining gangsterism? If yes, why? If no, why?

3.2 Questions for Ex-Gangsters:

1. At what age did you join gangsterism?
2. What are the things that you were involved in your days as a gangster?
3. To what extent were you involved in gangsterism?
4. What are the reasons that influenced you into joining gangsterism?
5. Do you consider social influence as a most important element that prompted you into joining gangsterism?
6. There are mainly 3 categories of gangsters in Malaysia- Triad gangs, Thug gangs, and school hooligans. Which category do you identify yourself with?
7. Did gangsterism solve your problem(s) or was there any benefit obtained from joining gangsterism?
8. What were the consequences of joining gangsterism? Was there a price to pay?
9. How do people (non-gangster) look at you as a gangster especially your family members, relatives and friends?
10. What made you quit gangsterism and how did you get out of gangsterism?
11. Are you easily accepted by the local community as an ex-gangster?
12. Have you regretted that you’ve joined gangsterism? If yes, why?
13. What advice do you have for teenagers nowadays, in terms of staying out of gangsterism?
14. In your opinion, what actions should be taken in curtailing and curbing gangsterism?

3.3 Questions for Policeman:

1. Gangsterism is widely discussed as a social issue in Malaysia. How is the current condition compared to 5 years and 10 years ago?
2. What is your perception(s) towards this issue?
3. Who are likely to get involved in gangsterism?
4. At what age teenagers are vulnerable or easily influenced into joining gangsterism?
5. Of the many gangsters who were caught by the police, what sort of background do they come from?
6. What are the steps taken by the authorities in curbing this issue?
7. What are the laws that are enacted in relation to this issue? Such as penalising the gangsters who breached the laws and regulations.
8. What else do you think the police force; Crime Prevention Foundation and Government could do to curb this issue?
9. Share with us some of your experiences in dealing with gangsters.
10. What are the advices you would like to convey to the younger generation who has the thought of joining gangsterism?

4. FINDINGS / RESULTS

4.1 Focus Group

All of the participant associated negative activities like extortion, gang fight, smuggle, bully, bashing up people with gangsterism. According to one of the participants, gangsterism means a group of people doing bad things with bad intention. The participants’ perception towards gangsterism is a state of being rebellious and wanting to be “cool”. When asking about whether they have been confronted by gangsterism, they all answered
“no” and said they would keep their distance away from them when they spot the gangsters because they afraid the gangsters might harm them.

When the researchers asked the participants who are more likely to join gangsterism, majority of them answered:

- When teenagers become aggressive and rebellious; don’t’ listen to parents’ advice
- Teenagers who want to be different and to prove that they are out from the norm
- Teenagers who just stepped foot on secondary school life; as they are lost in a new environment
- The students without proper upbringing, bad surroundings, family environment, and social influence
- Students who are in need of material goods and money
- Some students who join gangsterism for the fun of it

On the other hand, when being asked what are the effective ways in curbing and curtailing this issue, the participants answered that:

- The school, police and particularly the parents should work hand-in-hand with each other.
- The school authority should not be afraid of the gangsters and fearful that they will jeopardize the reputation of the school.
- The parents should pay more attention on the children’s emotion and not merely satisfying their material needs.
- The authority should increase the penalty to the gangsters who continuously breach the laws to increase the fear in them.
- More healthy and productive activities should be implemented and organized for the teenagers to have a healthy lifestyle.
- The police should send in a spy into the school environment and prompt intelligence from it.
- The schools should also recruit professional counsellor team and not any ordinary teachers to tackle this matter.
- The school hooligans should be forced into doing community work and charity work rather than just penalizing them.

Majority of the participants agreed that ex-gangsters should be given a chance in the society. “Everyone deserved a second chance” said one of the participants. All of them said that they have never thought of joining gangsterism as they contribute it to the proper upbringing, and the ideal surroundings. “Teenagers should have a purpose and goal in life; they need to know what they want in life, most of the teenagers that join gangsterism are those without a goal and those who are lost.” said one of the participants. Therefore, family environment played an important role because by spending quality time with them, they will understand their children better and whenever they are in trouble, seeking parents’ advice will be the children’s number one solution.

They also mentioned that media plays an important role in influencing the teenagers’ mindset and one of them said that the media constantly portrayed gangsterism as a hip and ‘cool culture’ which will inevitably misleads the teenagers to think that it is cool to be a gangster.
4.2 Ex-Gangsters

4.2.1 Thilagan (not the real name), 21 years old, College student

Thilagan was a prominent school hooligan in Cheras area. Gangsterism took over his life at the age of 15; while he was studying in form 3. During form 3, most of his friends became gangsters; and his academic achievement was also down the drain. His parents constantly scorn, despise and insult him by naming him “stupid” and “idiot”. In addition, he offended many people in secondary school. These factors prompted him into joining gangsterism.

When asked why he joined gangsterism, He replied: “9 out of 10 of my friends are gangsters” I would be left out and alienated if I don’t join them”. When asked about does social influence plays a part in influencing him to join gangsterism, he nodded and agreed. “I couldn’t stand my friends’ persuasion and taunting.” He told us another reason he joined gangsterism is to gain popularity and presence in school. Thilagan identified himself with school hooligans and thug gangs.

He recalled there was once he bashed up a schoolmate with a baseball bat for no reasons. “I did that because I want to vent out my frustration and anger in me, moreover I am a gangster and I have the privilege to do that.” He told us he is able to do anything after he joins gangsterism, there is a form of satisfaction and self-gratification beneath (Gangsterism). However, He fears walking alone without his gangster friends on the street. “If you are walking alone, you are easily targeted by gangsters from other territory.” He considered this as the consequences of joining gangsterism.

He quit gangsterism in 2003 and since then he has never thought of walking back the same path. “I quit gangsterism because I feel it is time to quit.” He said that joining gangsterism has wasted many years of his life. After wasting so many years, he told us it is time to turn over a new leaf and think of the future. Nevertheless, he also considered himself very fortunate to have quit gangsterism without paying any compensation.

He agreed that gangsterism contaminates the school environment and his advice for juvenile and teenagers is to choose the right friends. He also commented that school should promote more healthy activities co-curriculum. “If we are busy, we don’t have the time for such nonsense such as gangsterism.” He pointed out the National Service is a good way to expose the teenagers in various activities. He also thinks that the Crime Prevention Foundation should be more active in imparting knowledge about the severity of this social issue.

4.2.2 Nicholas (not the real name), 25 years old, Hair stylist

Our second interviewee who called himself an “educated gangster” is currently working as a hair stylist in Kuala Lumpur. He joined gangsterism in 1996 when he was 16 years old. Nicholas comes from an upper middle-class family and said that the lack of understanding from family members and academic achievement has influenced him into joining gangsterism. “I love to draw and cut people’s hair, I am interested in hair style and fashion design, but sadly my family didn’t understand and they even looked down on me.” During that depression, he got to know a few new friends who are gangsters. He said they are the ones who listened to him and helped him gain confidence in life. He said his friends who are gangsters were supportive of him being a hair stylist. After knowing them for few months he decided to join their gang and he began stepping on the wrong path.

He considered himself as school hooligan. “I was an “Educated Gangster” meaning I don’t offend other people or look for trouble” he said. The main reason he joined Gangsterism is to gain popularity in school and gain confidence in life. “I want to stand out; I want the whole
secondary school students to know who I am.” However, he also added that he feels vulnerable when walking alone in school or on the streets.

He decided to quit gangsterism at the age of 17 after he was flunked out by his secondary school. “I don’t want to be viewed as a failure; especially I don’t want my family and relatives to look down on me.” However, he didn’t regret joining gangsterism because he gained another real-life experience which money can’t buy.

He agrees that gangsterism contaminates the learning environment in school and thinks that the school should encourage more participation in co-curriculum activities. He also added that there should be more co-curriculum activities for students to participate in.

As for the individual, his advice for teenagers is to stay away from bad company and be strong in will against bad influence.

4.2.3 Kelvin (not the real name), 21 years old

Kelvin is a former gangster who is currently working as a waiter at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel. He earns a wage of just enough to support his family. Kelvin was exposed to gangsterism at the age of 13 when he first set foot into secondary school. His teenage life was surrounded by rage and violence with influence of gangsterism.

When he first stepped into Form 1, Kelvin was the target for bullies in his school because he was known as an Indian that could not speak Tamil. The Indian gangsters found this to be insulting and always use that as an excuse to bully him. Several months later, he was compelled to join a gang in order to protect himself. From then onwards, Kelvin fully associated himself with the gang; and was involved in gang fights. To gain protection, Kelvin paid RM 18 monthly as protection fee to his gang leader. As time goes by, he slowly began to enjoy and indulge in the deleterious activities. Not only Kelvin found out that being a gangster has the privilege to vent out his frustration and anger but most importantly the Indian gangsters are afraid to bully him.

In year 2000, Kelvin sunk deeper into gangsterism and turned out to be one of the most infamous gangsters known in Sunway area. Furthermore, He was also involved in the racial friction that happened between Malays and Indians at Kampung Medan in 2001. Soon after, Kelvin involved himself into several drug dealing cases. Kelvin identified himself as a thug because these activities were carried out even after he left the secondary school.

Talking about how the parents and relatives viewed him as a gangster, he said that he was not accepted by his family and community and therefore the gang was his only companion.

The turning point in Kelvin’s life happened when his parents were cheated by a businessman and there was nothing that they could do about it. Their life became a misery as they were facing financial problems. At that period of time, Kelvin spent most of his money buying drugs and alcohol. One day, he finally realized that he could not continue to live the life of a thug as he needs to bear the responsibility of taking care of the family. This turning point has made Kelvin changed for good and strived for a decent job. Kelvin says “once you pick up a knife, it’s really hard to put it down”. He advised the teenage gangsters to quit gangsterism as soon as possible.

However, he is now working as a waiter in a hotel and a part time coach for a football team. He unquestionably regretted making the decision to join gangsterism and said that it was gangsterism that ruined his life.

He advised the teenagers nowadays to be active in activities co-curriculum and social activities and ended the interview by saying family plays a vital role in a teenager’s progress in life.

4.3 Policeman, Chief Inspector Ooi Chong Lai
Mr Ooi began by telling us that the condition of gangsterism in Malaysia is getting better compared to 5 and 10 years ago. This can be backed by the statistics in Youth Quake where it is said that “42 cases of gangsterism in schools were reported in 2002, 25 cases in 2003 and 27 cases up to March 31st this year” (Youth Quake, 2005). Mr. Ooi added that the increase of job opportunities and a better living environment has contributed to the declining rate of gangsterism. Inspector Ooi added that most gangsterism cases can be found in cities such as Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Johor Bahru.

He said that gangsterism is not a new topic in Malaysia. He explained that gangsterism is the outcome of social circumstances such as economic depression and unemployment. However, he said that gangsterism among teenagers is still controllable. “The teenagers are mostly school hooligans.” The activities associated with school hooligans are collecting protection fees, extortion, bullying etc.

When asked who are more likely to be involved in gangsterism, his replied as follow:
- There is no specific age group; those with family problems such as divorced parents and arguments in the family as it indirectly puts aside the child’s welfare
- Peer pressure. Teenagers are most vulnerable into being influenced when they face problems in their lives as their weaknesses are easily seen thus being a “prey” for the gangsters.
- Gangsters may not be those who are weak and poor, the materially well-off ones can also be involved in gangsterism just to show off.

The researchers asked Inspector Ooi on what are the ways taken by the authorities in curbing this issue and the followings were his replies:
- The police forces in Subang Jaya have been working hand-in-hand with several secondary schools in curbing gangsterism. “I will pay a visit to the secondary schools and speak face-to-face with the problematic school hooligans and give them proper counselling.”

In addition, he said the society should not put everything on the shoulders of the police but work hand in hand with them to curb the issue. Parents play the most important role compared to other authorities as teenagers only spent about 6 hours at school while the rest are spent at home. He added by saying parents should not only concentrate on satisfying the material needs and wants of their children but lay more emphasis on spending more quality time as a family with them instead.

The laws enacted related to this issue are the Emergency Ordinance and Penal Code (Act574). Emergency Ordinance is an ordinance where detention is made without trial. Activities such as murder, robbery, rioting and forcing injury are of those can be placed under this ordinance. If the police felt that the case is strong against the suspect, they will submit the case to the ministry and awaits the order from the ministry to detent the suspect. Therefore, he urged the victims of gangsterism should stand out and testifies against the suspect and added the police force need the full co-operation of the public in order to bring the gangsters to justice.

His worst case in dealing with gangsterism was a gang fight between 2 groups of prominent gangs in Klang back in 2001. Teenagers with the age of 16 to 17 are involved in this scuffle and 3 of them were killed. The fight occurred because they were fighting for territory. Weapons used were spears and swords. Being only teenagers, they were very violent. “That incident was one of the most dangerous fight as it involved many people”, said Mr. Ooi. The authorities were alerted about the fight, but by the time they reach the place, some had run away. Fortunately, the authorities managed to reprimand several suspects who were believed to have participated in the gang fight.
Mr Ooi’s advise to those who have the thought of joining gangsterism not to try to get the taste of it, do not mix with bad hats, participate more in school activities and do not give in if being approached by gangsters. “All they need to do is to give a call to the police.” he said. “As for those who do have problems, do find a friend or teacher to talk to, having a listening party is good as they could offer help and advices whenever possible.” He stressed that by calling the police or by seeking help from their friends or teachers, will undoubtedly reduce the possibility of a teenager to become a gangster as their problem can be detected immediately.

Mr. Ooi ended the interview session by emphasizing that teenagers should not be afraid to approach the police when being confronted, perturbed and harassed by gangsters as the authorities will do their best in making sure that the ‘victims’ are safe.

5. DISCUSSION

What is it like to be viewed as a gangster? How do gangsters view themselves? From the view of others, they may look happy or contented with their lives, but deep inside it maybe the opposite. According to 2 of the 3 ex-gangsters, we can see that both of them were lacking confidence in life. Therefore, they joined gangsterism as a pathway to seek recognition and acknowledgement from others. They want to be somebody; they want to be recognized among their peers.

We can see that all of the three ex-gangsters did not have a good relationship with the family during their teenage life. If they maintain a healthy relationship with the parents, they might not have ended up as gangsters. As what Chief Inspector Ooi said; parents play the most vital role in a child’s progress in life and if a child encounters a problem, parents should be the antidote. In addition, family should not understand only the material needs and wants of the children; but also the psychological needs and wants of them. We can see that parents of all the 3 ex-gangsters did not understand the emotional state of the children and there wasn’t a tendency to understand the psychological process of the children. These entire factors contribute to the results of them ending up as gangsters.

Secondly, the results showed that human are susceptible to social influence especially peer pressure in all of the 3 cases. This is especially true when humans are facing problem, we tend to be easily influenced or even manipulated; we tend to look at the smaller picture of things and lose ground on what we should concentrate on. The results clearly showed that all 3 of the ex-gangsters joined gangsterism when they were facing problems.

Another fact is that gangsterism does not only refer to those who come from the lower rung of the society. In fact, some materially well-of people also need recognition and acknowledgement in their lives.

Lastly, all of the interviewees including the 3 ex-gangsters think that having more active participation in co-curriculum activities will unquestionably decrease the gangsterism rate in the country. Co-curriculum activities will not only equip the teenagers with practical skills but also communication skills. Teenagers will learn how to communicate with their members in meetings, projects and competition. Most importantly, students will be spending their time productively instead of straying around and engage in unhealthy activities.

6. CONCLUSION

Most of us understand gangsterism is detrimental to us and yet teenagers still make the decision to join. Why? According to our focus group interview, all participants formed negative
impressions about gangsterism; it is evidently people tend to associate criminal acts, misconduct, extortion etc with gangsterism; but what is the internal psychological process that prompted individuals into joining gangsterism? Is it the individual differences that make them join gangsterism, or the situational factor? We as human being constantly commit the fundamental attribution error and underestimate the external factors; the same thing goes in forming schemas and perception about gangsterism.

In this research, it is evident that teenagers joined gangsterism because of situational factor. Teenagers joined gangsterism when they are in need of something; it could be money, confidence, recognition and even a girlfriend. Therefore, parents should play an important role in understanding what are the needs and wants of their children; both materially and psychologically. Therefore, a healthy and close-bond family relationship can prevent teenagers into joining gangsterism.

In addition, it is no doubt that the media plays a complex and ambivalent role in the characterisation and propagation of gangs. There may be no proven, identifiable causal link between violence in the media and real acts of carnage perpetrated by disaffected youth, but many people believe that there is. Hence, there is a need for teenagers to understand that there is a clear distinction between the depiction of gangsterism by the media and the gangsterism in the real world and the media should also educate the viewers that being a gangster does not gives you the privilege to do whatever you want.

Finally, we are to conclude that anyone can be influenced into joining gangsterism due to family factor, living environment factor, psychological factor and most importantly social influence.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

There are several approaches and ways to curb this issue. Firstly, the researchers suggest that the secondary schools should enforce a rule whereby every student is compulsory to join a minimum of one co-curriculum activity. This can served as a prevention to stop children from becoming gangsters.

Secondly, Police Cadets Corp should also be implemented throughout the secondary school in Malaysia to work hand in hand with the police forces. Police Cadets is seen as a force that reduces the increasing indiscipline problems and social ill among the primary and secondary schools and the movement should be enforced at least throughout the major schools in urban areas.

Thirdly, the disciplinary department in school should be more active in inculcating and imparting knowledge about gangsterism issue to the students by constantly working hand-in-hand with the Crime Prevention Foundation. This can be achieved by organizing talks pertaining to gangsterism issue to educate the students, parents and teachers .This can be a preventative measure as in teaching the young people, parents and teachers about the danger of gangsterism and results of it hence the involvement of every body is required. In addition, School must also identify the problematic students and then call related organisation to help with that problem.

Lastly, parenting skills must be done. Community empowerment projects such as parent workshop should be organized to educate the parents how to communicate effectively to their children in all circumstances. Parents must be trained as counsellors and also people in the community must be trained as counsellors to the teenagers.
8. REFERENCES


