

Juvenile Gangs in Bangladesh: A Case Study of Their Impact on Civil Society

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Abstract

Young gangsters have emerged as a significant social and institutional problem in Bangladeshi cities, as they threaten public safety by challenging law and order and disturbing the social cohesion of civil society. This study investigates the nature, causes, and consequences of youth gang involvement in four urban areas of Dhaka and Chittagong through a mixed-method case study of these hotspots. Drawing on qualitative interviews with community residents, educators, police officers, and NGOs, as well as media reports and official statistics, the study shows that poverty, family breakdown, peer pressure, and political protection are the leading factors behind young people's engagement with gangs. The results indicate that gang activity has wide-ranging spillover costs—including increased violence, loss of public trust, reduced educational attainment, and decreased law enforcement effectiveness. The research also reveals institutional collapse and the collusion of political officials in sustaining gang structures. Accordingly, the paper recommends a multifaceted strategy that includes community interventions, juvenile justice reform, political accountability, and youth empowerment mechanisms. This study further enriches the literature on youth delinquency in South Asia and provides practical guidance for policymaking, civil sensitization, and early prevention frameworks in similar developing societies.

Keywords: juvenile gangs, political patronage, youth delinquency, civil society, urban crime prevention

Introduction

The issue of youth gangs has emerged as a major social problem in Bangladesh, increasingly concerning researchers, policymakers, and media professionals. According to Prothom Alo (2025), organized adolescent gangs, commonly known as kishor gangs, reflect inherent

socioeconomic and institutional weaknesses among urban youth in cities such as Dhaka and Chittagong. These groups consist of children aged between 12 and 18 years who are increasingly unstructured and engage in a range of criminal and antisocial activities, including drug trafficking, blackmail, sexual assault, and, less commonly, horrific murders (Dhaka Tribune, 2025).

Over 127 juvenile gangs are currently active in Dhaka alone, and the total number of juvenile gangs operating across Bangladesh has risen to approximately 20,000, according to a recent update by Protidiner Bangladesh (2025). Poverty, peer pressure, broken families, inadequate education systems, and political patronage have all influenced the formation of these gangs (Islam et al., 2023). Together, these factors create situations where young people turn to organized criminal gangs for social status, economic gain, and camaraderie (State Watch, 2024).

Gang problems among youngsters have a strong negative effect on civil society. The rise of gang culture erodes community confidence, increases fear of crime, and jeopardizes the rule of law. Infiltration by gangs, along with collaboration from political leaders, has allowed gangs to operate freely in the country's urban areas, making their influence more visible (GangLandNews, 2024). The media has also highlighted political connections with gang leaders and the use of gang violence to establish control or eliminate opponents (Prothom Alo, 2025).

While juvenile delinquency is a worldwide issue, Bangladesh associates it specifically with institutional weakness, poverty, and politicization (Islam et al., 2023). This paper will focus on the issues facing Bangladeshi civil society and will explore the nature, origins, and effects of juvenile gangs in Bangladesh using a case study. This paper has the following goals:

- a) Describe the development and organization of juvenile gangs in Bangladesh.
- b. Identify the social and psychological factors that motivate youth involvement in gangs.
- c. Examine the role of political patronage and institutional weaknesses.

- d. Analyze how juvenile gangs have affected civil society in both the short and long term.
- e. Propose evidence-based policy and practice recommendations.

By addressing these objectives, the study aims to assist policymakers and social activists in implementing effective interventions and to contribute to the burgeoning body of literature on juvenile delinquency in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

The Nature and Development of Juvenile Gangs: An Overview

Criminological research on youth gangs has been conducted internationally for many years. Thrasher (1927) introduced the concept of the gang as "groups of adolescents who show a spontaneous organization and which operate in a context of playing and fighting," and the first theoretical approaches were derived directly from his work. Many researchers have adapted the basic considerations of this approach to understand the organization and behavior of youth gangs within different socio-cultural contexts. Increasingly, researchers have focused on environmental and social factors—poverty, disrupted families, peer pressure, and the decline of traditional social institutions—as drivers of youth gang culture (Shaw & McKay, 1942). In Bangladesh, the rise of youth gangs has been popularized by media reports and the work of NGOs, particularly in relation to their involvement in criminal enterprises (Dhaka Tribune, 2025). According to Bangladesh Police, juvenile gangs are recruiting adolescents from low-income neighborhoods in more than 127 hot spots across the capital (State Watch, 2024). These factions are structured hierarchically, with a "boss" or "ringleader" leading a group of junior members. Furthermore, due to the complicity of some dishonest political and institutional forces, these gangs often operate with impunity (Sangbad Online, 2024).

Socioeconomic and Psychological Factors

Research by Islam et al. in Dhaka found that poverty, unemployment, and social breakdown are the main reasons for youth involvement in gangs. Based on their survey, more than 80% of gang-involved youth came from

families where one or both parents were unemployed or living on the peer pressure and the pursuit of identity and belonging emerged as crucial factors. Crucially, peer pressure and the quest for identity and belonging also emerged as important factors. Research conducted in urban centers of South and Southeast Asia has also documented similar findings, reiterating the international nature of this behavior (Hagedorn, 2008).

The psychological characteristics and behaviors of young gang members in Bangladesh have been widely reported in national dailies, including compilation books such as Prothom Alo (2025) and Bdnews24 (2025). Especially where institutional support and adult mentors are scarce, new recruits often see being part of a gang as a source of status, protection, and identity within their neighborhood. The media has also drawn attention to the role of technology (social media use, mobile gaming) in enabling gang culture to proliferate by glorifying violence and providing a digital space for gang connections and recruitment (Sangbad Online, 2024).

Political Patronage and Systemic Challenges

Political patronage has been identified as one of the leading enablers of the early gang phenomenon of the young in Bangladesh in many studies. But such matches have never been held in the streets and are rarely seen in newsreels. According to Protidiner Bangladesh (2025), Chittagong is home to over 57 active gangs, each serving as foot soldiers or enforcers for politically "connected" individuals. Similar patterns have been observed in Dhaka, where the gang leaders and their cohorts have used their connections with local councilors or party leaders as a cover and saved themselves from being taken to account (Dhaka Tribune, 2025).

Media has been saturated with reporting about episodes in which gangs of young people were propped up or used for attacks, extortion, and taking land by force for political ends (State Watch, 2024). Some councilors and ward leaders were discovered in the recent expose by Sangbad Online (2024) to offer patronage and protection to young gang leaders in exchange for their work and hence gang inclusion within the urban political ecosystem. This has created a culture of impunity in which, as the children say, young

perpetrators can be confident that whatever action the institution takes will be postponed, watered down, or entirely negated.

Impact on Civil Society

The aftershocks of young-gang activity extend far beyond the gangs. According to the Dhaka Tribune (2025), gang-related cases have induced general public anxiety along with curtailing their access to public places, mobility, and interaction. The businesses operate under pressure; families curtail the mobility of their children; and the trust in people in their locality decreases a lot in one of the places where the gang crime abounds (Prothom Alo, 2025).

The recent State Watch (2024) report, for instance, found that young gang violence has become discrediting of security forces, which “is notoriously making worse the social contract between the state and its citizen. The rising activity of youth gangs threatens the institution of civil society acting collaboratively, making it more difficult for communities to come together around issues of organized crime and systemic changes.

Young gang culture is also generational. Studies by Islam et al. (2023) and cited in Protidiner Bangladesh (2025) suggest that the embrace of gang connections prompts younger brothers and friends to emulate gangsters and thus ensures the continuation of the spiral of crime and social disintegration. There are far-reaching implications for the future of Bangladeshi social, political, and economic development and the potential normalization of young gangs within the fabric of the city.

Methodology

Research Design This study follows a qualitative case study approach and also includes some quantitative dimensions to examine the issue of juvenile gangs in Bangladesh and its implications for civil society. Qualitative research will contribute to a rich understanding of the complicated operating conditions, and quantitative data will provide a strong platform for assessing the extent and pattern of the problem.

Research Design

A multi-method design was used. The main information was gained through a review of national dailies in Bangladesh, particularly Prothom Alo, Dhaka Tribune, Protidiner Bangladesh, and Sangbad Online, which have extensively reported on juvenile gang incidents and trends. These outlets were chosen for their credibility, coverage, and prominence in the Bangladeshi media market.

Supplementary qualitative data was collected in semi-structured interviews with:

- a. Social work and NGOs and child crime
- b. State: Dhaka and Chittagong police forces
- c. Educators and community activists

Interviews were individual and in person and approximately 30–45 minutes in length. Consent was taken, and anonymity was confirmed to all respondents.

Quantitative data were obtained from official sources of the Bangladesh police, RAB (Rapid Action Battalion), and academic studies, such as Islam et al. (2023). This information is of key interest in gaining a better understanding of the social backgrounds of child gang members and the extent of their level of activity at a national level, among others.

Case Selection

The research concentrated on three localities identified as epicenters of youth gang life:

1. Mohammadpur, Dhaka is a hub where at least 15 active gangs operate.
2. Multiple groups of children and adolescents commit crimes such as extortion and drug selling in the Mirpur, Dhaka area.
3. Halishahar, Chittagong An area where youth gangs have mutated within deeply ingrained politically aligned groups QUOREGUARD.
4. Kamrangirchar, Dhaka — Most notorious teenage gang members are affiliated with a local gang within their group.

Each one is chosen for its unique demographic makeup and provides for a mix of socioeconomic status and school institutional enforcement. The study investigates the localized aspects of juvenile gang action and analyzes what those dynamics mean for the civil societies of varied urban sites by using a comparative case study methodology.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed for qualitative data and coded and thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis Thematic coding was used to find recurring themes, including:

- Socioeconomic vulnerability,
- Political connections,
- The influence of gang activity on civil society is significant.
- Institutional authorities responded to the findings.

We also triangulated statistical data from official reports and media coverage with qualitative evidence.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations, however, although every effort was made to maintain the trustworthiness and validity of the data collected:

- Gang activity is hidden and can potentially be difficult for people 'to know' personally about gang activity and personal interactions.
- A qualitative approach may not fully capture the statistical significance of the phenomenon.
- The transitory nature of juvenile gang dynamics means that findings may become outdated.

Findings and Discussion

The Development and Progress of Youth Gangs

The statistics indicate that the number of juvenile gangs has grown significantly throughout Bangladesh during the past ten years. As reported by Protidiner Bangladesh (2025), there are only around 127 active gangs in

Dhaka, with 20,000 young members nationwide. The gangs range from 10 to 15 active members to massive groups of 200–300 young people. Chittagong has also experienced similar dynamics, with 57 identified gang groups that are often linked to political patrons who usually act as enforcers (Dhaka Tribune, 2025).

The qualitative interviews conducted in this study backed up these figures. An educator from Mirpur stated:

“Gangs are woven into the very fabric of urban adolescence. They work in the open, exacting “tolls” from shopkeepers; they have younger brothers and friends who join to increase their scope (Personal Interview, 2024).

Socioeconomic and Psychological Factors

The statistics emphasize the importance of poverty, poor employment, and family breakdown in influencing children to join criminal youth gangs. According to Islam et al. (2023), 80% of gang-involved youth belonged to families in which one or more of the parents were unemployed; about 64% identified peer pressure as the main reason for joining a gang. In interviews, NGOs working with youth focused on the sense of fast cash, community, and status that attracts youth to gangs:

“The gang is the family for a lot of those kids. THE PROMISE OF BELONGING AND A SENSE OF PURPOSE GREATER THAN THE RISK OF ARREST” (Personal interview, Social worker, 2024).

And, Prothom Alo (2025) also emphasizes the role of mobile games and social networks in fueling the crisis. The platforms have turned into online recruitment centers where gangmasters groom teenagers, inducting them into a culture of violence and aggression.

Political Patronage and Systemic Challenges

One of the most significant findings of the present research is the participation of political actors and structures in the sustenance of juvenile gang behavior. Dhaka Tribune (2025) states that more than 57 gangs in Chittagong are patronized by politicians, which makes control efforts very

difficult. Creating identical trends in Dhaka, gangs provide foot soldiers for local ward councilors and political leaders (Sangbad Online, 2024).

On 4 March, the allegations were borne out in interviews with police officers:

"Juvenile gang members understand that we will apprehend them for their crimes before releasing them." Such connections influence a long-term solution" (Personal Interview, Police Officer, 2024).

Complicit political actors are at the heart of national media accounts. Ward councilors have long been known to openly protect and provide patronage to underage gangs in return for their support in election campaigns, land-grabbing, and asserting 'territorial control' have been pointed out in at least two reports—one in Prothom Alo (2025) and one in State Watch (2024).

Impact on Civil Society

Gang juveniles have serious consequences in civil society in Bangladesh. Areas affected by youth gangs see "trust breaking down" and the "withering away of community spirit" (Dhaka Tribune 2025). Businesses frequently face extortion and vandalism, forcing people to stay indoors after nightfall.

Interviews with Mirpur and Mohammadpur residents have highlighted a pervasive insecurity and distrust:

"Our children do not play anymore in the neighborhood. After dark it's gang territory, and the police seem to do nothing—or are told to do nothing" (Personal Interview, Resident, 2024). Research findings also indicate that street gang behaviors of juveniles might disrupt educational context, and a large number of adolescent gang members quit their educational institutions under the peer pressure and gang practices (Islam et al., 2023). It is the deterioration of social life that is sown in this cyclical process, where gangs represent a reference point in the lives of the younger age groups.

Systemic Responses and Policy Gaps

While the government has taken multiple steps, including police special units and anti-gang operations (RAB, 2024), the numbers also demonstrate

major shortcomings in enforcement and in bringing about rehabilitation. There was no long-term rehabilitation and reintegration.

NGOs and social workers revealed in interviews that many juvenile offenders quickly returned to gang life after their release.

Furthermore, current policies fail to address the primary causes of juvenile gang involvement. The absence of effective social safety nets, adequate vocational training, and community-based solutions has left a void that gangs are eager to exploit.

Various national media highlight the ‘urgent need of a multisectoral approach.’ Protidin Bangladesh (2025) and Dhaka Tribune call for holistic interventions that cannot be only written on paper but should deal with other measures: education, mental health help, family counselling, and system-wide changes that should be implemented in juvenile justice.

Recommendations

Strengthening Social Support and Education

Underlying Factors of Juvenile Gang Involvement Juvenile gang delinquency is rooted in socioeconomic distress and broken family structure (Islam et al., 2023). To combat this reality, the government of Bangladesh, as well as local NGOs and civil society organizations, needs to work together to increase access to quality education and social services. Specific interventions include:

- **After-school Programs:** Building community centers and after-school programs that offer young people safe alternative spaces. These centers could also provide tutoring, sports, and vocational training as gang alternatives.
- **Mental Health Services:** Providing adolescents, particularly those in dysfunctional or impoverished families, with psychological counseling and therapy can reduce feelings of alienation and aggression (Hagedorn, 2008).

- Parenting Programs: Helping families learn to recognize early signs of gang involvement and developing resources to provide supportive, nurturing environments.

Reforming the Juvenile Justice System

The juvenile justice system must be reformed to be more rehabilitative and restorative, aiming to reintegrate juvenile offenders into the community. The following measures are vital:

Alternative Disposition Programs: Substitute counseling, social services, and vocational training for standard punitive measures for juveniles.

- Re-entry As Reintegration: Establish post-release reintegration programs that are primarily targeted towards rehabilitation programs, including skills acquisition, literacy, and entrepreneurship.
- Specialized Juvenile Units: Create specialized units within the police department and juvenile court system that comprehend the psychology of an adolescent and handle the investigation and adjudication of juvenile gang cases accordingly.

Fighting Political Patronage and Institutional Corruption

A major cause of juvenile gang violence is the security provided by politicians (Dhaka Tribune, 2023). To disrupt this dynamic:

- Policy: The Government of Bangladesh needs to put into effect a legislative policy that would make it a punitive crime for any politician or official to use or benefit from juvenile gangs.
- Independent Oversight: Create institutions that are independent and that have the authority to probe political involvement and apply consequences for such actions.
- Community Policing: Engage established community leaders in policing to ease the burden on state institutions of coercive control.

Awareness and Civic Education

Media and civil society are crucial in changing the narrative and resilience-building in the community. Suggested interventions:

- **Public Awareness:** Implement media awareness efforts that portray the negative impact that juvenile gang involvement can have and the benefits of the alternative.
- **Civic Education Programs:** Introduce the teaching of civic responsibility, rule of law, and community cooperation as part of the curriculum.
- **Youth Leadership Development:** Assist NGOs and organizations to locate and mentor young leaders in at-risk populations.

Technological Monitoring and Intervention

Using the same technology that gangs, including juvenile gangs, increasingly use to coordinate and plan their attacks on computer screens across the city (Prothom Alo, 2025), the question might well be posed: trends: # Incidents and responses to them Homicides Drug-related killings Political killings Hacking groups mentioned By victim/suspect's ethnicity Barelvi Hardline Islamist Deobrang BNP members are categorized as ContentType 3 based on the victim's or suspect's religion. Sunni Fiqah, Islamic Combatants, Others Table 2: Goals/Motivations In addition to words used to describe gangs, common themes (e.g., crime, territorial control, recruiting, ethnic/sectarian links) could also be used to examine data during Throughout this section, words attempt to provide suggestive insights to inform future attempts at predicting spatial as well as temporal patterns.

- **Digital Monitoring Units** – Set up specific units in the police force to monitor the digital platforms where gang recruitment and mobilization occur.

Collaborate with Social Media Companies: Establish cooperation between the state and social media companies to identify and disrupt gang operations quickly.

Policy frameworks and Sustainable Partnerships

Approach Government must take a long-term, multi-sectoral approach:

- Comprehensive Response Plan: Develop a national plan including an integrated prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation approach for juvenile gang members.
- Collaborate with local and international partners, including NGOs, international organizations, and academic institutions, to adopt best practices from other countries and adapt them for implementation in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Juvenile gangs in Bangladesh are an increasingly menacing element that undermines civil society, thwarts social trust, and perpetuates poverty and violence. In this paper we have discussed the birth and formation of juvenile gangs in Bangladeshi society, and we have demonstrated their links to poverty, fragmented families, and widespread corruption. The review of literature and case review reveal that juvenile gang involvement is not a stand-alone issue but rather an intricate problem integrated within the social, economic, and political structures of the state.

Additionally, the results highlight the institutional gaps—particularly in the context of juvenile justice and in political institutions—which enable the gangs to operate. Without systematic reforms and multiple-level interventions, the juvenile gangs would continue to thrive, reconstituting communities and jeopardizing the future of numerous Bangladeshi adolescents.

To address this crisis, Bangladesh needs to take a multi-pronged approach, including prevention, rehabilitation, accountability, and systemic reforms. Government, NGOs, media, activists, and international actors have to collaborate to establish a context in which teenage armed groups no longer act with impunity.

While the task is daunting, with measures that target social support, educational reforms, institutional accountability, and long-term prevention, it is possible to set Bangladesh on a path towards a more just and inclusive

society. Addressing juvenile gang activity is not solely a matter of law enforcement; it is a crucial call to preserve the nation's life and preserve the civil fabric of society for future generations.

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