Exploring the Profile of Gangsterism in Malaysia from the Perspective of Experts

Nataraja Moorthy T[1*], Aaron Inbaraj D[2] and Mohammad Rahim K[3]

[1]*Associate Professor of Forensic Sciences, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Management and Science University, Shah Alam, Selangor state, Malaysia*
[2]*Investigator, ACE Confidential Sdn Bhd, Cheras, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*
[3]*Criminologist & Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, The National University of Malaysia, Federal Government of Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

*Corresponding author:** Nataraja Moorthy T, Associate Professor of Forensic Sciences, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Management and Science University, Shah Alam, Selangor state, Malaysiam, Fax: +6 0355108663, Tel: +6 0129224610, E-mail: natrajamoorthy@rediffmail.com

Abstract

Criminology has long been interested in issues relating to gangs, both on the street and inside prisons. Gangsterism is a current threat among the well-being of the youngsters globally. The social phenomenon of gangsterism has shown to increase the rate of vandalism, threating and drug addiction among the teenagers and bring a part of organized crime. The present study was aimed to explore the profile of gangsterism in Malaysia from the perspective of Malaysian experts with reference to modus operandi, familial, environmental backgrounds of the gangsters and highlighted the causes of gangsterism in Malaysia. The experts involved in this study are criminologists, senior police officers, psychologists, academicians, social workers, school counselors and others. The data were collected from the experts through interviews and questionnaire and analyzed the data using thematic analyses. The results showed that the gangsters have been changing their modus operandi depending on the environmental conditions to mislead and confuse the investigations. It is understood that drug trafficking is an underlying cause for gangsterism. Furthermore, familial background as well as environmental conditions seems to play a vital role in the formation of gangsters and gansterism in Malaysia. The results of this study would provide beneficial information to enforcement agencies to curb the issue of gangsterism in Malaysia.

Keywords: Criminology; Gangs; Profiling; Experts' Perspective; Malaysia

Introduction

All societies in the modern world are troubled by crime, and the common public is equally fascinated by criminals and fearful criminal behavior [1]. It is common to watch in the news and documentaries about serial killers and violent criminals who murder or assault victims due to certain similar features that the victim all possess. Most violent criminals committed the crime based on a peculiar past experiences that make them seek some form of personal vendetta against persons [2]. Over the years, forensic analysts have sought means of identifying such criminals based on their mode of operation, signature behavior, target victims and material evidence from previous crime scenes [3]. This is where the process of criminal profiling is applied. Internationally, two main approaches have been developed for the purpose of profiling: crime scene profiling and offender profiling. Offender profiling has been called many names such as criminal profiling, criminal personality profiling, criminological profiling, behavioral profiling, criminal investigative analysis [4], offender profiling, socio-psychological profiling and linkage analysis [5]. Offender profiling is an investigative tool used primarily by law enforcement, psychologists, academics, and consultants to identify the major personality, behavioral, and demographic characteristics of an offender based upon an analysis of the crime scene behaviors [6,3].

Crime in Malaysia manifests in various forms, including murder, drug trafficking, money laundering and other contemporary crimes. Crime and violence in schools is a threating the well-being of the young people in Malaysia. Despite of national efforts to restore a culture of learning and teaching, incidents of gangsterism, theft, vandalism, burglary and even rape are reported on school grounds [7]. Criminology has long been interested in issues relating to gangs, both on the street and inside prisons. Often youngsters, most likely in their mid-teens join the gangster group in their immature stages. The old gang members get them on drugs as soon as they join so that their common sense is decreased. The average gangsters are from low income neighborhood due

to their poverty. It is anticipated that gangsterism started in the schools in the form of bullying [8]. In general, the gangs bear their logo and gang members are proud of their gang and freely admit their membership. Much display tattoos openly and dress in a style identifying their particular gang [9]. Royal Malaysia Police (Polis Di Raja Malaysia – Malay language) have publicly exposed the symbols and logos of underworld gangs to stop them from recruiting new members. Royal Malaysia Police Headquarter, Bukit Aman's gambling, vice and secret societies division chief Senior Assistant Commissioner of Police, Datuk Jalil Hassan said that the disclosure of the symbols and logos would help to educate those who were unaware and join these gangs inadvertently. "We have received information that children as young as 15 years old are joining gangs," as stated in a press meeting (The Star online newspaper, Malaysia, 30 Aug 2013). Figure1 shows the logos/symbols of gangs and tattoo marks on gang members, as released by Malaysia Police.

Figure 1: Logos and Tattoos used by the gangs in Malaysia as per Royal Malaysia Police

The gangsterism issue in Malaysia is a hot topic as gangsterism has been reported frequently by the media in Malaysia. Although it receives wide coverage in media, scientific studies related to gangsterims in Malaysia is yet to be explored. It is important to derive findings from the local culture perspectives, as the findings from the West cannot be applied within the local context. With this in mind, it is imperative to explore the profile of gangsterism in Malaysia from the perspective of experts as it can provide valuable information for the development of a suitable intervention formula as well as proactive measures to curb this issue among Malaysians.

Methods

The study was conducted in Peninsular Malaysia, wherein the experts have been practicing and available for this study. This gangsterism related research is based on the information obtained through a semi-structured interview. The open ended interview questions were prepared by the group of Criminologists and validated by another group of experts. Three main themes in gangsterism were explored namely: **(i)** modus operandi, **(ii)** familial, environmental background and **(iii)** causes of teenagers' involvement in gangsterism.

The lists of potential interviewees (experts) were selected based on their experiences in handling/researching the issue of gangsterism in Malaysia. The interviewees were comprised of experts like criminologists, police officers, psychologists, academicians, social workers, school counselors and so on. There were 10 experts were involved in the study. The position of experts from Government Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) is Inspector of Police, Assistant Superintendent of Police and Deputy Commissioner of Police (R). Similarly academicians like Senior Lecturers and Associate Professor in Criminology and Psychology from three Malaysia Universities were included in the study, also counselors from school, parenting coordinator and nongovernmental organizations. The interviews were conducted with questionnaire in the form of individual and face-to-face format. The following is the questionnaire used to obtain information based on their experience and expertise in the field of criminology and psychology.

1. List the modus operandi (MO) and criminal behaviors in and out school compounds.
2. Why are the students involved with bullying at schools?
3. How do gangs operate in Malaysia?
4. What are the gangs' activities identified by police?
5. What encouraged gangs behavior?

6. How to recruit the new members in gangs?
7. How do gangs manage to sustain themselves in Malaysia?
8. What are the active areas of gangs in Malaysia?
9. List down the logos and tattoos used by the gangs in Malaysia.
10. What are the sources of income for these gangs?
11. Which age groups are most actively involved in gang activity?
12. What are the familial backgrounds of the gangs?
13. What are the influencing factors to join gangs?
14. What are the role of parents and society to reduce gangsterism in Malaysia?
15. Why do teenagers get involved in gangsterism?
16. What is your opinion regarding gangsterism activities at school compounds?
17. How gangsterism affects the society and country in long term?
18. How to prevent them from gang involvement in the first place, or to disengage them from the gang if they are involved?
19. What are the prevention programmes implemented by the Royal Malaysia Police to control the gangs?

A written consent was obtained from the interviewees prior to data collection and was audio recorded. The interview time duration was about one to two hours per expert and the interviews were audio recorded. The data were transcribed into verbatim for the purpose of thematic analyses. The data were analyzed qualitatively for the three themes of interest. NVivo 10 software was used to organize code and extract relevant information from the verbatim. Meanwhile, thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze and report patterns or themes within qualitative data. The data were presented in the form of graphs, indicated every component in each sub-themes based on experts' comments or point of view.

Results

The findings are expressed in the form of themes with sub-themes. The theme and sub-themes for gangsterism are shown in Table 1. There main concern was to find out the modus operandi of these gangster groups in Malaysia. The sub-themes emerged were operation, activity, recruitment, sustain, active areas, income etc. as shown in Table 1.

Modus Operandi

Based on the view of experts, there are few elements found in the operation style of these gangster groups. Most of the experts mentioned that the gangster groups in Malaysia have been operating systematically, involved in many illegal activities. They have their own hierarchy and tend to change their modus operandi in order to mislead the investigations. In addition, these gangster groups always change their modus operandi to prevent detected by police force and operate or active at their respective areas. Recruitment into the gang usually starts in the middle school where the age group is between 10 and 13. Most gangs target youth that are easily talked into doing work for the gang. Current gang members will often use peer pressure or fear and intimidation tactics to get others to join their gang. Providing cigarettes, alcohol, and other drugs as a lure is another method of recruitment. Some gangs are currently targeting girl for recruitment gangs have evolved to play an organizing role in politics and illegal markets Once they are members of a gang, youngsters are taught the gang's history and rules, are encouraged to have the gang's tattoos and adopt clothing styles unique to the gang. The experts also mentioned that these gangster groups are operating behind certain registered private companies with their own jurisdiction to run the illegal activities and operating based on demands. They have been sustaining their activities through political backup and by regular thefts or by being 'taxed' through bogus protection rackets.

No	Themes	Sub-themes
1	Themes Modus operandi (MO)	Operation method
		Recruitment process
		Sustaining factors
2	Familial and environmental backgrounds	Dysfunctional family
		Environmental factors
		Parenting style and social responsibility
3	Causes of teenagers involvement in gangs	Individual and supporting factors
		Gangs activity in schools
		Effect to society and country

Table 1: Generated themes and sub-themes for gangsterism

Familial and environmental background

The family unit has undergone tremendous and radical changes over the past decades – and many of these changes are not positive. The changes are the result of various factors, including social, economic, political and developmental one. At the same time, changes in the family unit have been the blamed for a perceived breakdown of morals, discipline and social order. The eroding

of traditional extended family structures, absent and busy parents, teenage pregnancies and single parent families may in one way or another contribute to children and young people joining street gangs. Families should basically provide three things to their members, namely protection, belonging and respect. When these are absent, children or young people may look to gangs as an alternative to fill the void. It is generally agreed that multiple risk factors, rather than the nature of the risk factors, create the likelihood that children will become troubled teenagers who remain "outsiders" to society. In some children's lives, risk factors are concentrated. In others, 50 one or two may exist. Every child needs a cushion against the risk factors in his or her family or neighborhood. The poorer the child – economically, in family and social connections – the greater they need.

When healthy family structures are absent, young people and children may be predisposed to joining gangs. The concept 'traditional' family structures, meaning a household with a father, mother and children, is deliberately not used because the researcher recognizes that these may be too restricted. It is a fact that not only children of single mothers join gangs and that many single mothers provide a healthy environment for their families. Dysfunctional family systems create fertile ground for gangsterism. If this is combined with adverse socio-economic conditions, young people may look for spaces and places where they can try to make meaning of or find meaning in life.

Causes of teenagers involved in gangs

Teenagers join gangs for a variety of reasons. It is shown that adult gang members hire youngsters to run drugs, because penalties are so much weaker if they are caught. A study of African-American gang in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, revealed that the founder of each gang who was interviewed had left school prematurely--most were expelled for fighting. Yet, other researches show that some youth join gang because of their needs or wishes for recognition or status, safety or security, power, excitement, and new experiences--particularly under conditions of social deprivation. Joining a gang is also a way for teenagers to achieve status, as well as self-importance. Joining gang gives youth who have low self-esteem a sense of love and respect from gang members. Youth whose self-esteem has been damaged by parents, peer rejection, and school failures may find new identity and self-worth through being in the gang.

Based on experts' view, Figure 2 shows the illegal activities of gangs in Malaysia include prostitution, robbery, gambling, hire killers, kidnapping, taking protection money, drug trafficking, also hired body packing, clash between triads, illegal car park services, man power supply and acted as guardian for certain premises. Drugs and prostitution show the highest percentage of most popular illegal activities among gangster groups. These gangster groups have been frequently changing their modus operandi to prevent police suspicion and to continue their illegal activities. In addition to take care of illegal car parking, some of the gangs are working behind big shots, VIPs and politicians.
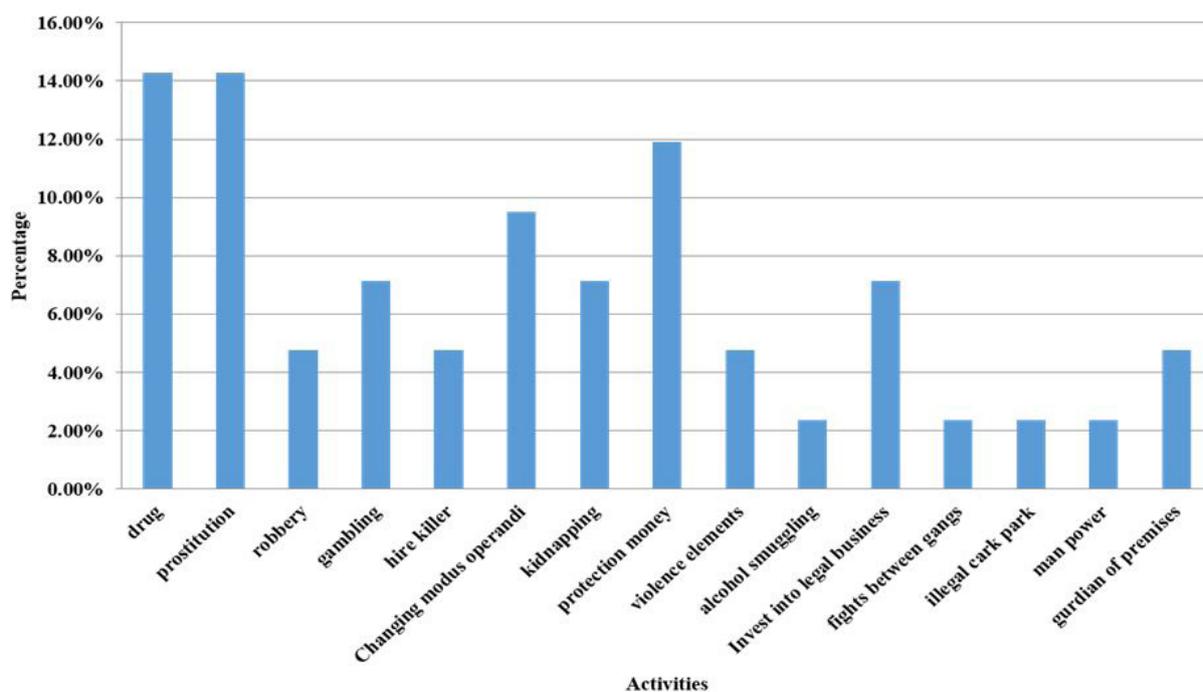

Figure 2: Bar graph showing the various illegal activities of gangs in Malaysia

Figure 3 shows the recruitments process and causes to join gangs. They are targeting weaker students, low self-esteem and vulnerable to be bullied. School drop-outs are their hot choice of recruitment. Students in the schools are allowed to mix with the gangster group outside the school compound and trained to commit illegal activities or crime. Thus the young gangsters are developed in the school premise itself.
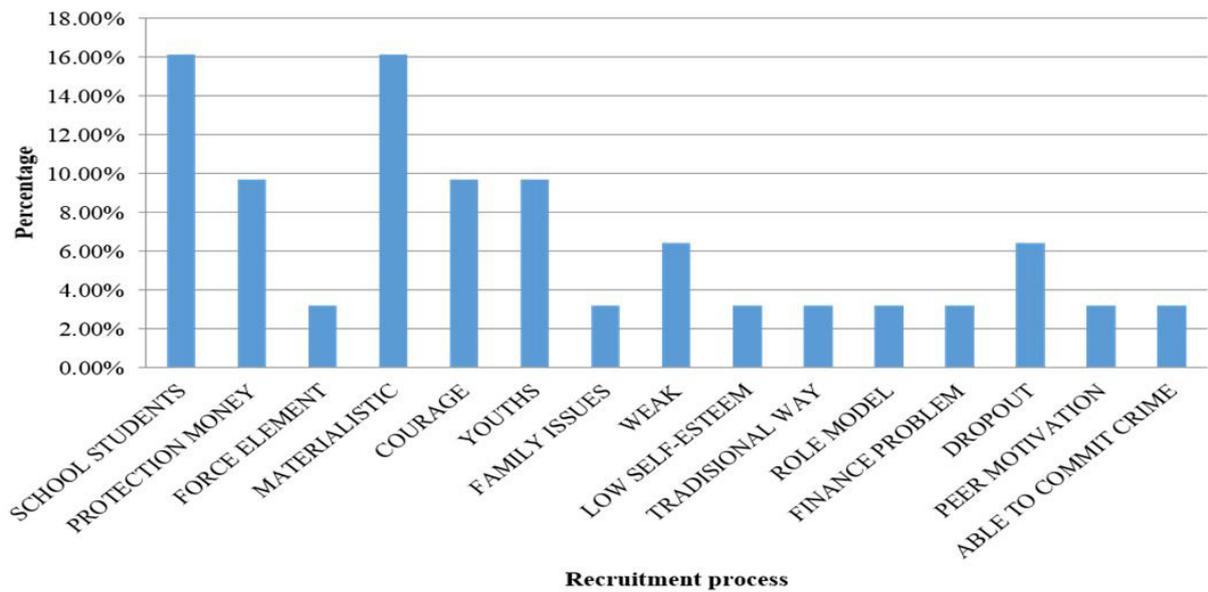
Figure 3: Bar graph showing the percentage and process of recruitment

The gang memberships are managed to sustain themselves in Malaysia based on few elements or criteria. Experts narrated incidents that the gangster groups are carrying out their illegal activities behind certain registered business companies and have been changing their modus operandi (MO) then and there, thus keep away from police suspicion. Some of the gang members are maintaining a culture of violence within their territory and sustaining their activities. An expert, also a senior police officer stated that the group members sustain their actions within their territories and also portraying a brotherhood bond of acceptance and loyalty through difficult times among members because the gang members share almost the same socioeconomic backgrounds.

In the current situation, the young students are attracted by offering money and made them feel safe and proud to mix with senior gang members. Initially, the new members are given small tasks like money collection, causing public nuisance etc. and they moved to the next stage to commit crime. Once they are reliable, they are given bigger assignments like drug distribution, kidnapping and so on. The gangster groups are acting based on races viz. Indian, Chinese and Malays for their involvement in various illegal activities.
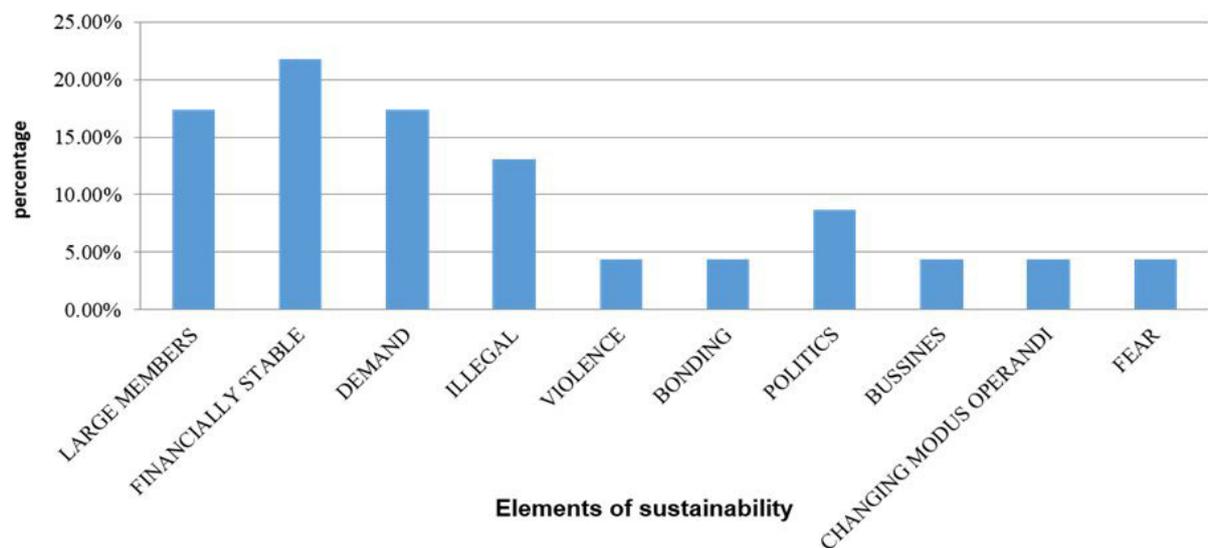

Figure 4: Bar graph showing the elements of sustainability and percentage

Figure 4 presents the elements of sustainability of gangsterism in Malaysia. For sustainability, these gangs groups are recruiting a lot of new youngsters to sustain moreover and also advancing their illegal activities according to demand. Besides they are getting demands from some VIPs as backup and financially stable to run their activity as some of them giving acknowledgement for the gangster group. Anyhow Malaysia Police are doing their best to slash down the wanted gangsters under various types of operation like *Ops Cantas* and arrest gangsters under *POCA*. The study shows that the gangsters did not have a good relationship with their parents during teenage periods. Parents play a vital role in their children's progress in life and parents should be a role model to children.

Figure 5 depicts the familial elements to enter gangster group, even during school days itself. Some of the gangsters have a good family background but the parents did not understand the psychological needs of a child rather than material needs. Also, some of the gangsters came from family with abusive parents. The experts indicated that poverty and poor education are also the driving force to join lads in gangs.
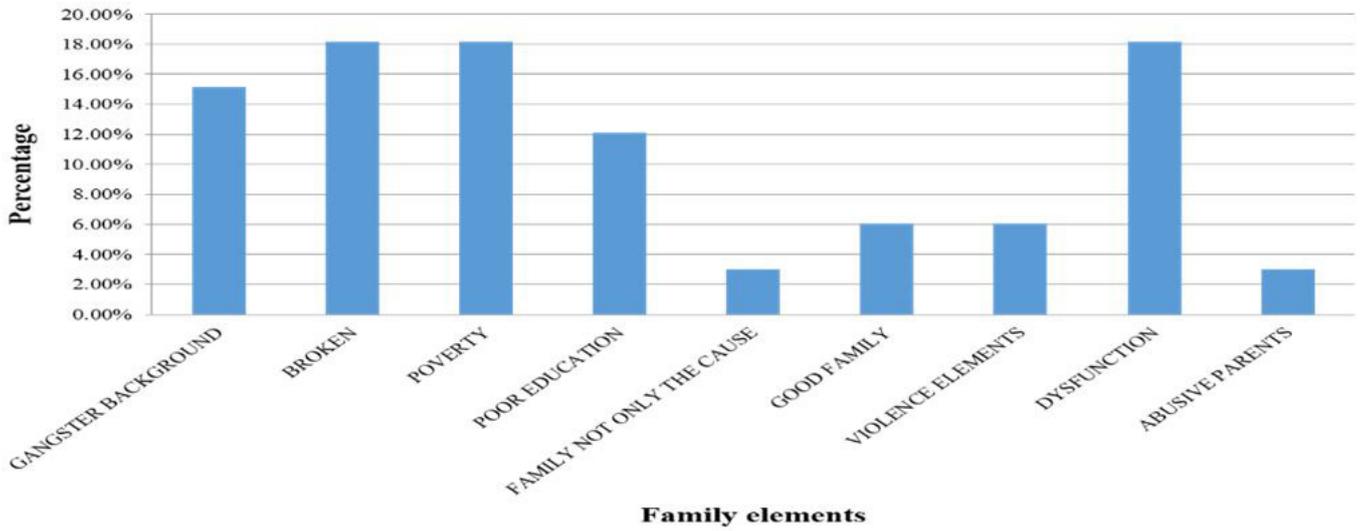

Figure 5: Bar graph showing the familial background of gangsters

Figure 6 highlights the environmental factors that influencing someone to join gang groups. Based on experts' professional experience with gangsters, experts suggested that gangsterism was influenced by peer motivation and neighborhood or living environment, influenced by movies and influenced by their own individual characteristics. Besides that, some teenagers wish to lead a luxurious life and need instant easy money that made to join the gangs. Unemployment, lack of education, peer motivation, some of the school environments is other influencing factors to join gangs. As mentioned that media plays an important role in influencing the teenagers' mindset and one of the experts said that 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.
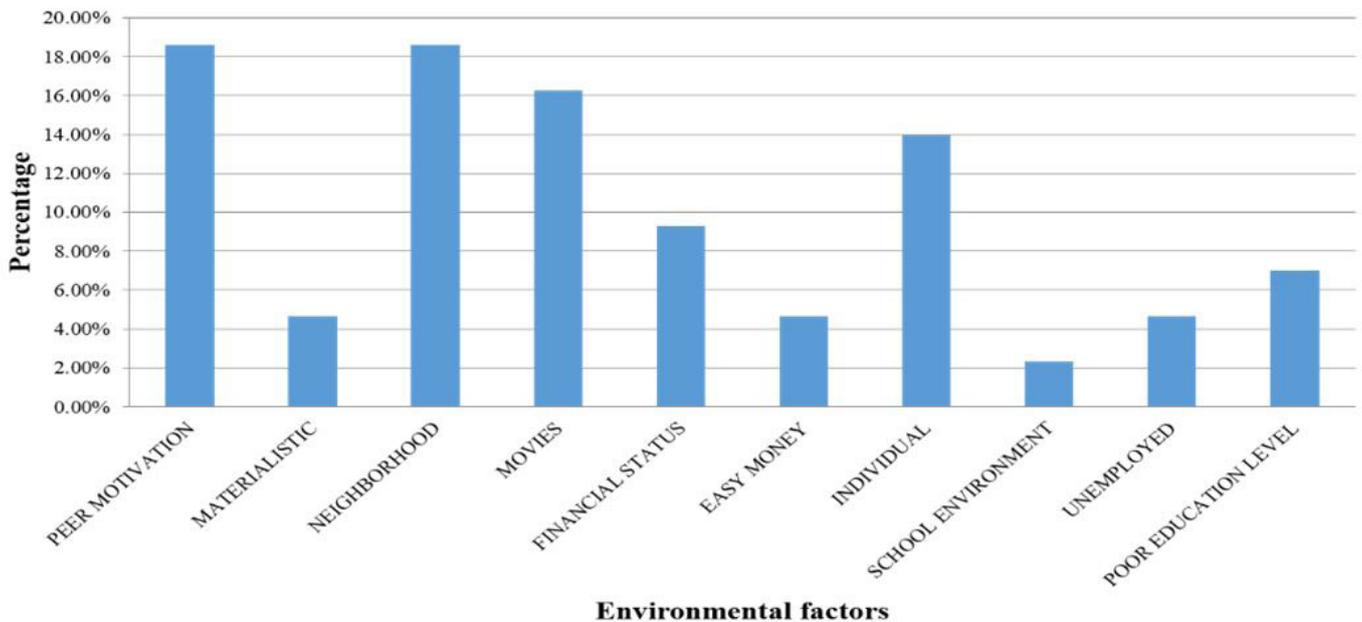

Figure 6: Bar graph showing the various environmental factors for gangsterism

Many experts expressed the similar views that gangsterism in school compounds are only in small scales and not very obvious but the activity is high outside the school compound. Their activities are focused after school hours or outside school compound. This expert also mentioned that small gangster groups in the school are monitored by the gangster groups functioning outside the school compounds and supported them whenever needed.
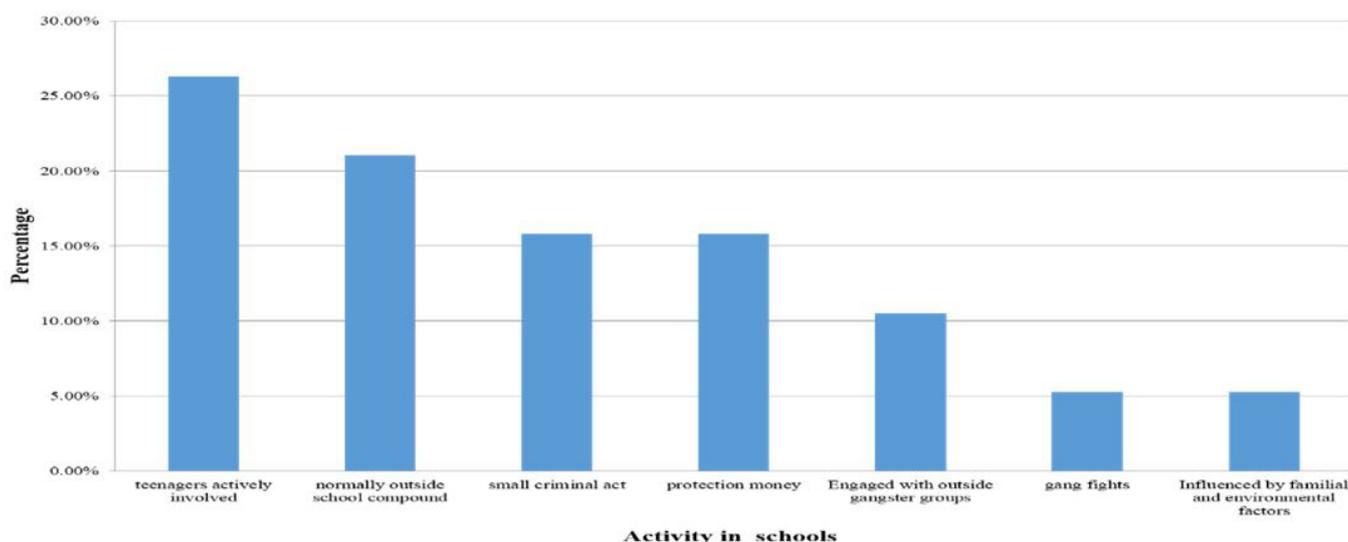
Figure 7: Bar graph showing the gangster activity in schools

Figure 7 shows the gangster activities in the school and the percentages, based in experts view. Most of the experts mentioned that about 27% teenagers are actively involved in gangsterism during their school days and 22% of teenagers are in active gangsterism outside school compounds but the students also tend to involve with small criminal act within the school compound. The present study also shows that 16% of the students are involved in collecting protection money in the school compound and 5.26% of them involved in gang fights within school compound. Some experts mentioned that students are influenced by the familial and environmental factors. The thoughts of joining gangster groups came from school students. This is the main reason of involvement of students in the gangster groups [10]. The school students are courageous enough since they have a link with outside gangs. In school compound gangsterism still exists but not so violent because the students know that action would be taken by the school authority, against erring students involved in violent in school compounds.

Discussion

Gangster profiling is an important investigative tool used by law enforcement, psychologists, academics, criminologists, crime scene investigators and consultants to help identify the major personality, behavioral, and demographic characteristics of an offender based upon an analysis of the crime scene behaviors [11,12]. Bullying is a problematic issue in Malaysia schools. Bullying is a way of treating people roughly with the intent of showing one's strength and makes the victim feel weak and respect the bullies. Also bullying is an aggressive behavior, which can be either physical or psychological, performed repeatedly with a victim and aims to make them feel uncomfortable, insecure, and isolated from those around them. Bullying can threaten students' physical and emotional safety at school and can negatively impact their ability to learn. The family background of the perpetrator is a contributing factor for such ill behavior of bullying within the school campus. Lack of emotional support, authoritarian parenting, divorces, domestic violence and poor parental communication are all potential factors in the lives of bullies [13]. There has been frequent reporting in the media on bullying cases that took place in the Malaysian schools of late [14]. The bullying behavior in the school may be described as school gangsterism [15]. A bully's behavior does not exist in isolation. It may indicate the beginning of generally antisocial and rule-breaking behavior pattern that can extend to adulthood [16]. A recent article stated that young people today are in danger of turning to gangs because they are being fed on a media diet that is high on violence, danger and crime [17]. The present study on gangster profiling is based on the perspiration of Malaysian experts and tested under three themes viz. Modus Operanti (MO), familial and environmental. Gang violence fluctuates month to month or even year to year. Modus Operandi of gangs is constantly changing due to the increase pressure of the police. Malaysia people complaint center, i.e. Pusat Aduan Rakyat Malaysia (PAR) is undertaking "Prevent Gangsterism – Say No" campaign as part of its social work on the ground to prevent school children's falling into gangs. According to experts view, gangsters are transgressors, mostly originated from the schools because of some aggressive behavior of some students which may be either physical or psychological in nature. These behaviors affect the students by victimization, causing illness and discomfort. In Malaysia, Royal Malaysia Police continuously plan and enforce many suppression strategies like 'Ops Cantas' and 'Ops Cantas Khas' to control the issue of gang-related activities [18]. Parents are very powerful role models and children will mimic the behaviors of parents, wanting to be like them. When parents engage in violence, children may assume violence is the right way to do things.

It is indicated that bullying is one of the cause for future involvement in gangs. In order to reduce or control bullying, a research based anti-bullying program KiVa, had been developed in the University of Turku, Finland [19]. As a result of KiVa's success in Finland, appeals for global dissemination have been numerous. In fact, the program was recently disseminated to Italy and other countries, and a rigorous evaluation revealed strong effectiveness [20]. KiVa theory emphasizes changing classroom culture and teachers may be best-suited to lead KiVa lessons because of their role as classroom leaders [21]. In the same way, South African government introduced an integrated "National Anti-gangsterism Strategy" to curb the issue of gangs [22].

Conclusion

It is concluded that the present study highlighted the gangsterism in Malaysia based on Malaysian experts' perception, field and professional experience. Gangsterism profiling is an important tool in criminal investigations. But currently gangs in Malaysia are going to ground and are under control, even though some rare incidences are reported here and there. Even though the policing interventions are being implemented, the scourge of gang is deeply seated in many poorer communities and still requires a complete all of government response to address the implications. Policing is but a part of the solution.

It is advised to those who have problems, better seek the help of your teachers, good friends and even police, to talk and get counselling and not to try the taste of gangs. In Malaysia, many organizations are ready to help the youngsters whatever the problem they have and guide them in right direction. Special attention will have to be given to the prison gang structure which feeds the systematic adoption gang culture.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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