

# Why Youth Join Gangs and Somalis' Approach to Gang Prevention and Intervention

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## Abstract

In recent years, youth gangs have been an issue of social concern in Somalia. From this concern comes a desire to conduct research about gangs, their formation, and what can be done to intervene with them. Researchers' recommendations can lead to success for organized crime groups in the country.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to investigate why youth join gangs and Somali's approach to gang prevention and intervention.

**Design/methodology:** A qualitative method has been used for the data collection; different focus groups and a total of 10 key informative interviews have been conducted with Mogadishu residents. Three key variables were investigated namely: joining, prevention, and intervention to gangs based on the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process. transcripts were used to analyze data.

**Findings** The findings of this study indicate that youth join gangs because of a lack of parental guidance and support, peer-to-peer influence, drugs addiction, the presence of gangs in the area, political interest, and so on.

**Research limitations/implications.** This study only emphasized Somali Gangs; thus, the findings of the present study may not be applicable to other countries.

**Originality/value:** Limited studies have been conducted to investigate why youth join gangs and how the government can build gang prevention and intervention services in Somalia.

**Keywords:** Gang, prevention, intervention, join, Somalia.

## Introduction

Youth gangs have a long history in Somalia, and they have been emerging periodically since 1968. Literature indicates the existence of five different waves of youth gangs in Somalia.

Intellectuals argue that the rise of youth gangs known as Iyaal Faa'ali in 1988 had a major contribution to the collapse of the former government in 1991. Since after Iyal Faa'ali, three different waves of youth gangs known as "Iyaal Weero" have emerged in the country, and the last wave of youth gangs emerged 2021 and became an obstacle to people and business in Mogadishu districts.

In the last three years, from 2021-2023, crimes from youth gangs have reached a peak. Many incidents, including killing, robbery, rapping, and looting, have been reported from youth gangs known as "Iyal Wero".

Reasons for gang membership have been hypothesized differently, and no empirical research has been conducted to determine why youth join gangs.

The Somali president, prime minister, and mayor of the capital equally criticized youth gangs and urged them to take legal steps. Therefore, little is known about the dynamics that drive gangs and how to best combat their growth.

This study investigates why youth joining gangs, the risk factors and attractions that increase youth's susceptibility to join gangs, and how to prevent and intervene.

## Literature Review

According to the 2014 Population Estimation Survey of Somalia conducted by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 81.5 percent of the population is under the age of 35. Youth gang activity has become a national concern in Somalia. This section aims to review the literature surrounding youth gangs.

Youth gangs have a long history around the world, and there are no universally accepted definitions for a gang or illegal gang activity. However, a commonly used definition is Klein (1995) defined "any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in the neighborhood; (b) recognize themselves as a notable group (almost invariably with a group name); and (c) have been involved in a significant number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement agencies". Research has shown gang members have lower overall self-esteem than non-gang individuals (Wang, 1994).

The age at which youth join youth gangs may vary depending on many factors; however, Snyder and Snyder *et al.* (2006) found that youth become gang member by the age of 17. Although Thornberry (2003) stated youth

join gangs at some point during their adolescence; between the ages of 12 and 15. From the prevention perspective, this means attempting to identify, at an early stage, those youth, groups, or communities that can reasonably be assumed to become gang-involved. Klein and Maxson (2006)

### **Methodology**

Basically, this research was mainly focused on why youth join gangs, prevention and intervention methods from a Somali's perspective, such as personal views on prevention, and experiences with intervention, and identifying reasons for joining. The study applied the qualitative method, particularly interpretive phenomenological analysis. According to Giorgi (1989 and 1997), phenomenology refers to the totality of life experiences that belong to a person.

### **Sampling**

This research method was derived from the phenomenological assumptions, which means the phenomena was explored by asking an individual respondent who has experienced the phenomena to describe his/her experiences (Sale, 2007). Sampling is therefore, purposeful in that an individual who has experienced the phenomena will be able to describe his/her perceptions or experiences about the reasons why youth join

gang and Somali's approach to prevention and intervention. Altogether, three focus groups and ten key informative interviews were comprehensively completed.

### **Data Collection**

To obtain criteria and sub-criteria for the study, the researcher conducted, a focus group discussion (FGD) and also conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with respondents about their perceptions on youth joining gangs, prevention, and intervention. Respondents represented from districts mainly affect youth gangs in Mogadishu. FGDs were conducted at the Somali Researchers Association (SRA) office and lasted 90 minutes each, meanwhile, interviewees were given the option of meeting at the SRA office, or at another location that was convenient for them. The interviews lasted approximately 30-40 minutes.

An interview guide was prepared on various subjects, including: why do youth join gangs? How can people prevent and how can the government and the community intervene against youth gangs? Please tell us about your own experience. Participants were encouraged to discuss anything related to the survey objectives. Notes were taken during the interviews.

During the FGD and interviews, the interviewer used a pen and paper to make notes about the interviews. The interviewer also used an electronic recorder to record all the conversations of the interviews (at the beginning of the interview, the interviewer asked permission from the participant to record his/her interview conversations). At the end of the interview, the interviewee was requested for contact in the future to review the transcript of their interview.

### **Data Analysis**

The recorded interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word 2010. Sale (2007) recommended that the transcripts be verified against the voice recording. This process of transcription was continued until the author was satisfied with the quality of the transcriptions.

This research primarily sought to identify the reasons why youth join gangs and Somali's approach to prevention and intervention. During the interviews, different themes emerged that seemed focused on youth gangs. Themes were grouped and developed into criteria. The decision to select a theme as the main criteria is based on the frequency of its occurrence during the interviews.

### **Findings of the Interview and FGD**

Apart from the main research questions, respondents were asked for general and demography-related information, which lays foundation for the main questions. These include the definition of youth gangs in the Somali context. The majority defined that: -

*“Youth gangs are a group of youngsters with notable names allied to fight with other youngsters living outside their village and also harm others in the neighborhood by either looting, rapping, killing, or torturing.”*

#### ***Respondents were asked the trend/history of youth Gang***

Youth gangs have a long history in Somalia, According to interviewed respondents, the youth gangs of Somalia emerged at different times; the first youth gang started in 1968 and erupted in Howlwadag, Wardhigley, and Waberi, however, when the military took over the power in 1969, they disappeared, and most probably they joined army forces known as “Guulwade”. The second wave was 1988 from Gang team known “Iyaal Faa’ali” Their headquarters were Wajadir and Dharkaynley districts in Mogadishu, but in 1989 they expended to other districts in Mogadishu, including Yaqshid and Karan, Iyal Faa Ali reached the peak mid of 1990 before the civil war erupted in the country. When the civil war started, most youth gangs, if not all, joined armed men.

The third wave was 1993-1995, when youth gangs erupted again in Mogadishu, known as Iyaal Weero; mainly they were in Wardhigley, Howlwadaag, Yaqshid, Karaan, Wadajir, and Dharkeynley. However, unlike Iyal Faa Ali, they were not high risk. In 1996, when the war between Ali Mahdi and Aidid restarted, most youth gangs joined the war and became militia men.

The fourth wave of Iyaal Wero was from 2004-2006 when most of the districts of Mogadishu were controlled by warlords. At that time, youth gang were operating similar districts in wave two. However, in 2006, when war between Islamic courts and warlords erupted, most of the youth gangs joined the war and became militia men.

The fifth wave of youth gangs started in 2021 and reached its peak in mid-2022. Similar to Iyal Faa Ali, the fifth wave started in Dharkeynley and Wadajir and spread to corner districts such as Karan, Yaqshid, and Daynile. They have similar characteristics to Iyaal Faa Ali, they are popular doing all crime activities to the residents and civilians in the neighborhood.

### Groups of Youth Gangs

The number of youth gangs varies depending on the youth population of the district. For instance, one district can have five to ten different youth gangs operating under

different names. Groups are named after their leader, village, or character. Each team is estimated to consist of an average of 30 -50 members. The age group is about 15 to 35 years old. According to various respondents' estimates, there are approximately 1,200 – 1,500 youth gangs in Mogadishu, the majority of which operate Dharkeynley, Wadajir, Karan, Yaqshid and Daynile. Table 1.1 indicates that youth gangs operate in different districts; their names.

Table 1. Youth Gang names and operation area

District	Group name	Group name	Group name
<b>Dharkaynlay</b>	Buulada (BX)	BNT	Salaam
	Codweyn	VIP	Jamame
	kuweyt	Sheeq Abdi	Tiintinley
	Dabaqeyn	Khalil	Jubba
<b>Karaan</b>	Xaawo Casir	Gaalmaadow	Diikow
	Modern	Cali Geedi	Babu Raqiis
	Gaawo	Bulo Maxay	Xerka dhere
<b>Wadajir</b>	Xawo Taako	God godka	Fajaq
	half Waaberi	Ceel Qalaw	ciiltire
	Olol	Dj	Citizen
<b>Yaqshid</b>	Shamaana	Lamagalay	Lo'leey
	Siliga		
<b>Daynile</b>	Saxaro	Tabu	SiiSii
	Xukumada kushka	Aqalagubow	xukumada Ceelka
	Badroolka	Ifis	Godka
		77	

### Tribe/Clan

It is beyond the scope of the study to investigate the tribe of the youth gangs; however, after the civil war erupted in the country, different districts were dominated by different tribes, and the study hypothesis is that gangs operate in a district where tribe X is dominant, and gangs belonging to the tribe dominate the district.

### Gender

Female youth gangs can be involved in the gang on a number of different levels. Respondents were asked if there's a substantial number of female gangs in Mogadishu. The study found the male-to-female ratio of gang members was approximately 10 to 1. (10 percent of males versus 1 percent of females) and they are not in the front line.

### Reasons youth join the gangs.

There are many reasons why young people become involved with gangs. However, during FGDs and KII, the study found the following factors: -

- ✓ Lack of parental guidance and support ( separation of parents)
- ✓ Peer-to-peer influence
- ✓ Addiction to drugs
- ✓ Low education attainment and expectations

- ✓ Being wanted and feared by others
- ✓ Perceived financial gain or other income.
- ✓ Because gangs are common in the area
- ✓ Family low income
- ✓ Social media influence (Popularity)
- ✓ Being invested in politics or having a political interest
- ✓ Lack of entertainment centers (sports field)
- ✓ Revenge
- ✓ A history of gang involvement in the family
- ✓ Low self-esteem.
- ✓ Unemployment

✓ Copying violence from films and games  
 A respondent said, "*Many gang members are youth who are not successful at school and are not receiving the attention and support they feel they need from their family.*"

Another respondent said, "*Most youth gangs are from the country; when they come to the city, relatives or the host community neglect them, thus, joining a youth gang is the only choice.*"

### Signs to realize youth involvement in gang activity.

- ✓ Having unexplained money, expensive new items, or clothing.



- ✓ Changing appearance with special haircuts.
- ✓ Carrying a knife.
- ✓ Not obeying family regulations
- ✓ Wearing improper clothing “gang style”.
- ✓ Uses violent language

Worthy note; unlike other countries’ gangs, Somali youth gang do not use tattoos and they are not rappers.

### **Prevention of Youth Gangs**

Gang prevention focuses on discouraging youth, especially those at high risk, from joining gangs.

- ✓ Parents’ closely monitor where their child is and what they are doing.
- ✓ To do an aggressive campaign on social media, telling you the potential negative consequences of gang involvement and criminal behavior.
- ✓ Develop concerts, letting youth know that gang members can end up injured, dead, or in jail.
- ✓ Local authority and community should have good communication.
- ✓ Religious leader should talk in Friday prayers (Qutbah) about youth gangs.
- ✓ Children must not be neglected in order for them not to join a youth gang.
- ✓ Create a patrol force (special forces).

- ✓ Banning the import of different kinds of drugs
- ✓ There must be an act specifically for the youth gang
- ✓ Decrease risk factors that contribute to interest in gang activity

### **Intervention**

Gang intervention generally targets active gangs and gang members. During KII and FGDs respondents regularly repeated the following themes:

- ✓ Open rehabilitation centers
- ✓ Open vocational training centers
- ✓ Open sports centers and engage in activities.
- ✓ Block source of income (if any).
- ✓ Create employment opportunities
- ✓ Negotiations with the gang leader.
- ✓ Clan elders should communicate with gangs from similar tribe/clan

Apart from positive intervention, there were negative steps respondents recommended to intervene with gangs. These include:

- Shooting them once they are met
- Keep in jail without trial
- Have a cruel punishment
- ✓ Police should do a regular ambush at the gangs’ meeting point.

✓ Being part of a youth gang should be considered illegal, and the parliament should pass a law.

## Conclusion

Youth gang violence is not new to the country, therefore, it is extremely important for Somalia to prevent and intervene in all crime gangs possible to halt the peace process in the country. Still, much is not known about strategies for addressing the problem; should be developed at both the micro (e.g., individual gang members) and the macro (e.g., gangs as entire units) levels. The government should have enough data gathered by local researchers to design a gang control program.

It should be avoided denying the existence of a gang problem, task force should be established to develop an appropriate action plan for the management of the gang problem in each district. Finally, the Somali government should increase its awareness campaign, open rehabilitation centers, and open technical schools for repented gangs.

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