

## **Family Bonds or Breaks? A Qualitative Study on How Family Influences Substance Abuse Among Male Youth Gangs in Colombo**

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### **Introduction**

Substance abuse among urban youth male gangs in Colombo, Sri Lanka, is a pressing issue, contributing to rising crime rates and social instability. While prior research has examined the connection between gang involvement and drug use, a few studies have explored the specific influence of family dynamics in this process. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating how family environments contribute to substance abuse within youth gangs in Colombo.

A review of the literature shows that many gang members come from dysfunctional families, often experiencing parental neglect, domestic violence, and a lack of emotional support. Broken family structures and inadequate emotional bonds drive many youths toward gang affiliation for a sense of belonging (Howell & Egley, 2005). Peer pressure also plays a significant role, particularly for those from broken homes (Esbensen et al., 2009). Additionally, Thornberry et al. (1993) highlights that a lack of family support increases the risk of gang involvement and delinquency.

Despite this understanding, research in Sri Lanka remains limited. This study provides qualitative insights into the experiences of gang-involved youth and their family dynamics. The research aims to uncover how family factors influence substance abuse among urban youth gangs in Colombo. While it holds potential for guiding family-centered interventions, the study is limited by a small sample size and its focus on urban areas, which may not reflect the experiences of rural youth.

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## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how family dynamics contribute to substance abuse among young male gang members in Colombo. A case study approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Grounded theory was used to identify recurring themes and develop a theoretical framework for how family influences substance abuse within this specific population.

### **Sample**

493 gang members aged 18 to 30 were identified for the study. From this population, 20 participants were selected using purposive sampling, which allowed for the intentional selection of individuals who could provide rich, relevant data. These participants were selected based on their varying family backgrounds, levels of gang involvement, and substance abuse experiences.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and covered topics such as family relationships, gang involvement, and substance abuse history. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and detailed field notes were taken during observations to capture non-verbal cues and contextual factors.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and coding was conducted using NVivo software to identify common themes. The grounded theory approach helped develop categories based on recurring patterns in the data. Themes such as family neglect, domestic violence, and emotional support were examined regarding their impact on substance abuse.

### **Tools**

The study utilized semi-structured interview guides to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for participants to share their personal experiences. NVivo software was employed to organize and code the qualitative data, and thematic maps were used to visualize relationships between identified themes.

## Results and Discussion

The qualitative analysis revealed several key themes regarding how family dynamics influence substance abuse among young male gang members in Colombo. Thematic analysis identified four primary factors: parental neglect, loss of family stability (broken families), domestic violence, and lack of emotional support. These factors emerged as significant contributors to the participants' involvement in gang activities and substance abuse.

### 1. Parental Neglect:

Many participants reported feelings of abandonment and neglect from their parents during childhood and adolescence. One participant stated, "My parents were too busy fighting each other; they did not care about what I was doing. That is when I started spending more time with the gang." About 95% of participants cited parental neglect as a driving force behind their initial engagement with gangs and subsequent substance abuse.

### 2. Loss of Family Stability (Broken Families):

The breakdown of the family unit often led to diminished parental control and guidance. One participant shared, "After the divorce, my mother was too busy working to care for us. I had to find my way, and the gang was there." Many youths, without stable parental figures, became vulnerable to gang influence, where drug use was every day.

### 3. Domestic Violence:

Domestic violence was a recurring theme, with many participants describing their homes as hostile environments. One youth mentioned, "My father would hit my mother, and then he would hit me. I had to leave the house... the gang became my escape." Approximately 89% of participants identified domestic violence as a significant contributor to their substance abuse.

### 4. Lack of Emotional Support:

Emotional neglect was a universal experience among participants. Many expressed that their families failed to provide necessary emotional guidance. One recalled, "When I wanted to talk about my problems, my parents did not listen. I turned to drugs because it felt like the only way to deal with my pain." Around 81% mentioned emotional neglect as a factor in their substance abuse journey.

Table 1: Types of Family Influences on Substance Abuse n= 20

<b>Family factor</b>	<b>percentage</b>
Parental Neglect	(95%)
Domestic Violence	(89%)
Lack of Emotional Support	(81%)
Substance use	(98%)
Family members are prison inmates.	(78%)
Broken families	(99%)

## Discussion

The findings indicate that family dysfunction characterized by neglect, violence, and emotional isolation plays a central role in the path to substance abuse for young male gang members in Colombo. Many participants turned to gangs as a substitute for the family support they lacked, with substance abuse emerging as a coping mechanism for unresolved trauma.

### Case Study 1: "Escaping the Violence"

A 23-year-old gang member grew up in a violent household. His father's abuse and his mother's emotional unavailability pushed him away from home. He stated, "By the time I was 16, I stopped going home. The streets were better than home, and the gang was like my family. Drugs helped me forget." This case illustrates how domestic violence drives youth toward gangs and drug use as a form of escapism.

### Case Study 2: "The Search for Belonging"

Another participant, aged 19, felt abandoned after his parents' divorce. He expressed, "I did not feel like I belonged anywhere after my parents split. The gang was the first place where I felt accepted, and drugs were part of the culture." This case highlights the importance of emotional support in preventing substance abuse; its absence led directly to gang involvement.

### Case Study 3: "From a Broken Home to the Streets"

A 20-year-old described how his family's breakdown after his father's departure led him to gang life. He said, "After my father left, my mother struggled to keep things together. I felt like I was on my own. The gang gave me a sense of belonging, and the drugs helped numb the pain." This example emphasizes

the lack of solid family support structures that can drive youth toward negative behaviors.

These case studies align with social bonding theory, which posits that weakened family bonds increase the likelihood of deviant behaviors, including substance abuse. In the context of Colombo, family dysfunction exacerbates youth vulnerability to gang life and drug use.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the critical influence of family dynamics on substance abuse among young male gang members in Colombo. Key factors such as broken families, parental neglect, domestic violence, and lack of emotional support significantly contribute to youth involvement in gangs and drug use. Strengthening family bonds and providing emotional support are essential to address these issues. Additionally, preventing domestic violence can create safer environments for youth. Future research should explore the effectiveness of family-centered interventions and develop policies that support healthy family structures, aiming to reduce gang affiliation and substance abuse in this vulnerable population.

**Keywords:** Colombo Sri Lanka, Family, Qualitative Study, Substances, Youth Male Gangs

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