

**GANG VIOLENCE: ACTIVITIES AND EFFECTS ON STUDENTS' SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOME PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BAMENDA I MUNICIPALITY (CAMEROON)**

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**ABSTRACT**

Understanding and studying violence in school settings predisposes various entry points. Most often, discussions are generalized with little attention to details on the actors, actions and effects. This study examines violence from a group or gang orchestrated perspective in order to appreciate their activities and the potential effects they cause on students' socio-emotional development in Bamenda I municipality of Cameroon. A descriptive survey research design was employed in this study with the use of purposive and convenient sampling techniques to select a sample of 188 students from three public secondary schools namely: Government Bilingual High School (GBHS) Bamendankwe, Government Technical High School (GTHS) Bamendankwe and Government High School (GHS) Bangshie. A semi structured questionnaire was used for data collection. Data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20.0, by calculating frequency, percentages, mean, and standard deviations. The Linear regression analysis was used to verify the hypothesis while the qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that gang violence has a regression analysis of  $F(1, 186) = 6.500$ , and expressed 25.5% ( $R^2 = .397$ ) of the variance in socio-emotional development, indicating that gang violence has a significant effect on socio-emotional development of students. This clearly indicates that when students engage in or are victims of gang violence, their self-esteem, decision making skills, social awareness and relationship with others are negatively affected. It is therefore recommended that Guidance Counsellors and School Psychologists should provide individual/group counselling and support services to students who have been affected by gang violence, to help them cope with the emotional and behavioral challenges. There is need for schools to develop proactive intervention measures to prevent formation of gangs and their activities in schools rather than being reactive.

**Keywords:** Development, Effects, Gang, Socio-emotional, Students, Violence.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

In contemporary Cameroon school settings, violence occupies a crucial slot among the factors disrupting an enabling learning environment, students' development and campus security. While attention has centered on identifying the possible causes of the phenomenon, research on the composition, nature and actions of the actors has not been distinguished between individual and group modes of violence. This study isolates gang (group) formations as a peculiar but less articulated complex source of school violence that requires better understanding if sustainable measures are to be taken to mitigate the issue of violence in school milieus.

According to the National Gang Center, (2021) and Egley et al, (2014), gang violence refers to the involvement of students or individuals affiliated with gangs in harmful and illegal activities within the school environment. These activities include physical fights, vandalism, verbal harassment, cyberbullying, drug abuse or the use of weapons to intimidate, harm or assert dominance over other students, school staff or rival gang members. The rate at which students are involved in gang activities in Cameroon secondary schools is disturbing. According to Abdul et al, (2017) and Ngufor & Bona, (2015), the emergence of gangs in Cameroon's secondary schools can be traced back to the 1980's, when youth gangs started to form in major cities like Douala and Yaounde. This became more rampant from the year 2000 with high rate in secondary schools across Cameroon with some schools becoming no go areas for students and teachers. Some of these gang activities extend to the community and become a threat to many. Gang violence is a serious issue that may have some impact on the physical, psychological and emotional well-being of students causing great concern among educators, parents and policy makers. Most often attention is paid on the physical effects of gang violence and little is considered on the socio-emotional well-being of students which may also hinder the learning process. Therefore there is need to look at the effects of gang violence on the socio-emotional development of secondary school students within the Bamenda I municipality as well as some recommendations for possible preventive measures on formation of gangs and their activities in the school environment.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of literature here focuses on gang related activities in schools, effects and some preventive measures. Gang violence in schools refers to acts of aggression, victimization, or intimidation perpetrated by group members or individuals affiliated to groups to harm others or destroy school property. According to Reid et Al. (2000), about 10% of high school students are reported to be involved in a gang at some point in their lives which may affect their interaction in school. According to the National Gang Center, (NGC) 2021; Egley et al., (2014) and Klein & Maxson, (2006), the activities of gangs in school include physical assaults, verbal harassment, cyberbullying, drug abuse/trafficking, sexual harassment, bullying or the use of weapons to intimidate, harm, or dominate others. Gang members in the school setting also engage in forceful recruitment of other students into their group. Mncube & Steinman (2014) emphasis that one of the main characteristics of gangs in schools is the use of weapons like knives, guns and some writing materials like pens, pencils, bottles on non-gang members when they encounter any conflict. This could be the same issue in Cameroon public secondary schools but there is insignificant research to justify this. According to Carlson & Esbensen (2017), gang violence is not limited to victimization but it contributes to a number of perceived physical and social incivilities within the school such as tagging, graffiti, drug selling and substance use on school grounds. This is an indication that gang violence constitutes diverse number of activities depending on the context. NGC (2019) and Willey, (2023) state that some of the indicators that students belong to gangs are changes in their behavioural patterns like: being aggressive, secretive, withdrawn and change of friendship group; clothing, hairstyle, language, handshakes, body signs and also a decline in academics. They may often possess unexplained money and other gadgets. These are alerts that the school authorities and teachers should always take not of.

The prevalence of gang violence varies significantly from school to school. Research has identified several risk factors contributing to gang involvement among students. According to Widom & Maxfield, (2001), exposure to violence at home or in the community has been linked to an

increased likelihood of gang involvement since some children perceive it as normalization of violence and a need for protection from the gang. Mehdinezhad V & Rashki (2018), indicate that when children are exposed to group violence on the media or at home, they have the tendency to believe that gangs can protect them when they are in trouble. Widom & Maxfield (2001) reveal that children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to engage in violent behaviors because it exposes them to feelings of isolation, and alienation, which further increase the risk of gang activities. Peterson & Krivo, (2010) states that some children get involved in gang because of poverty and feeling of hopelessness. Therefore, the children view gangs as a means to earn money or gain social status. The reports from Youths.Gov indicates that risks factors like aggressiveness, delinquent siblings, academic failure, substance use, lack of school connectedness, negative interpersonal relationship with the school administrators and teachers are some of the causes of students involvement in gang violence. These indicates that the greater the number of risk factors that a student is involved in, the more likely he/she is to join a gang in school. According to Sadler et. Al. (2010), schools that report a gang presence among students often report higher rates of victimization on school property and may actually contribute to feelings of fear at schools.

Gang violence affects students and other school staff in diverse ways. It is associated with negative mental health outcomes including depression, anxiety, as well as low self-esteem. From the findings of Carlson & Esbensen (2017) in some schools across the United States, students reported that observing gang actions leads to intense fear and isolation among students which at times eventually contribute to school dropout. According to Bailey (2011), children exposed to gang violence has poorer socio-emotional development, including increased levels of depression, anxiety, aggression, negative impact on social skills, including their ability to make friends, and to cooperate with others. This could often lead to thoughts of suicide and self-harm. Biney (2018) indicates that gang violence is associated with negative mental health outcomes and students who experience it are more likely to have lower academic performance and more behavioral problems at school. He further indicates that students use various coping strategies like relying on family and friends for support, seeking professional help, and engaging in self-care activities to deal with the negative effects of gang violence. From the perspective of Krohn, et al, (2011) and Lauritsen et al. (2016) and Sadler et.al.(2010), gang affiliation is associated with a range of negative outcomes such as higher levels of depression, anxiety and other mental health problems, lower academic achievements, increased involvement in delinquent behaviors and stress. These results show that gang violence can have serious consequences on adolescent's socio-emotional development and overall wellbeing. Carribbean News Global ( CNG, 2025), reports that the "Ministry of Social Transformation in Antigua and Barbuda is anxious about the emergence of gangs and violence against school children, that one of the remedial actions it proposed in late November is to develop a legislation that makes gang membership and gang activities illegal" According to the National Gang Center (NGC 2017 & 2019), the best ways to identify and respond to gangs within the school environment is to create a gang intervention process that begins with awareness and understanding of the gang issues, provides prevention measures, emphasizes consistent consequences for gang behaviors, provides alternative activities, refer parents to Parent's Guide to gang brochures found in their website, develop community partnerships and establishes school safety measures. The center also reiterates that when schools identify gangs in their schools, they should convene a team of school administrators, teachers, school-based counselors, mental health specialists, school resource officers, outside law enforcement, vetted gang intervention specialists, and representatives from agencies that have responsibilities for gang-

involved youth who will help in bringing different perspective and can contribute professional expertise. This team can focus on the most difficult gang-involved students by collectively monitoring their behaviors and by providing case management, follow up and referral services in and out of the school environment. Mncube & Steinman (2014) indicates that code of conduct and school safety policy are vital tools in the prevention and management of school-based violence, but should be adjusted to meet the school's specific needs regarding violence and discipline. From the study carried out by Fisher, B. et al., (2018), they were concerned with reduction of gang activities in schools and their findings indicate that school uniforms in particular may be a useful way to reduce both gang activities and negative outcomes associated with gangs. According to the Case IQ Resource Center, gang violence can be prevented by organising training programmes for school personnels to raise awareness on the early signs of gang involvement, and how to address and resolve conflict in the right way. The Youth.Gov report reiterates that in order to prevent gang violence in school, students should be trained on interpersonal skills, and youth recreational and referral services should be made available. Generally, there is very little literature and research on gang violence in the Cameroon context especially in relation to the activities and effects on students development. Most of the studies are based in on the western perspective that is why this study focuses on finding out the violent related activities of gangs and their effects on students' socio-emotional development in Bamenda I Municipality of Cameroon.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What are some of the gang related activities among secondary school students in Bamenda I Municipality?
2. What are the effects of gang violence on the socio-emotional development of students in secondary schools in Bamenda I Municipality?

### 4. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employed a descriptive survey research design where data was collected from students in three public secondary schools in Bamenda I Municipality, North West Region of Cameroon which were as follows: Government Bilingual High School (GBHS) Bamendankwe, Government Technical High School (GTHS) Bamendankwe and Government High School (GHS) Bangshie. These public schools were purposely selected because of the frequent number of violent cases reported in public schools and were also the three registered functional public schools in this area during the 2023/2024 academic year. To determine the sample size of the study, the Yamane's approach with formula is:  $n = N / (1 + N (e^2))$ , was used. A convenient sampling technique was used to select a sample of 188 respondents from forms three, four and lower sixth distributed as follows: GBHS Bamendankwe (66), GTHS Bamendankwe (62) and GHS Bangshie (60).

The instrument used for data collection was a semi structured questionnaire which was made up of closed and open ended items. The instrument was divided into three sections. Section A consisted of the demographic characteristics of the respondents, section B focused on students opinions on the existence of gangs and their activities while section C was made up of the closed and open ended items on how gang violence affects socio-emotional development. The closed ended items were measured using the Likert scale: Strongly agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), Strongly disagree (SD). The validity of the questionnaire was ascertained using both face and

content validity. The reliability of the instrument was ascertained by the use of the internal consistency reliability analysis. The average reliability coefficient was found to be 0.760, this value is generally considered acceptable for social science research. After confirming the validity and reliability of the instrument, the copies of the questionnaires were administered in the various schools with the assistance of the resident Guidance Counsellors. Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20.0 and linear regression model was employed to test for the hypothesis. The qualitative data (open-ended questions) were analyzed using thematic analysis.

**Ethical consideration:**

The researcher sought consent of the various principals and students by giving the details of what the research was all about and the reasons for choosing their schools. They were also assured of confidentiality (especially as there was no space provided for their names or detail description of themselves), openness, and honesty in the research. The respondents participated in the research voluntarily.

**5. FINDINGS**

The first aspect of the findings was to confirm from students the existence of gangs in the selected schools as seen on table 1.

**Table 1:**

*Prevalence of Gangs in schools*

Schools	Yes %	No %	Total %
GBHS Bamendankwe	62 (32.98)	4 (2.13)	66 (35.11)
GTHS Bamendankwe	57 (30.34)	5 (2.66)	62 (33)
GHS Bangshie	53 (28.19)	7 (3.72)	60 (31.91)
<b>Total</b>	<b>172 (91.49)</b>	<b>16 (8.51)</b>	<b>188 (100)</b>

The percentages on table 1 indicates that an overwhelming majority 172 (91.49) of the respondents accepted that gangs exist in their respective schools.

**Question 1.** What are some of the gang related activities among secondary school students in Bamenda I Municipality?

The respondents were also asked to list some of the violent activities carried out by gangs. The responses were grouped in themes and presented on table 2.

**Table 2:**  
**Gang activities in schools**

S/N	Themes	Frequency
1	Collective assault	165 (87.76%)
2	Intimidate non members	151 (80.32%)
3	Gossip	131 (69.68%)
4	Consumption of alcohol	92 (48.93%)
5	Sexual Harassment	87 (46.28%)
6	Smoking	81 (43.9%)
7	Cyber bullying	80 (42.55%)
8	Introduce members to the use weapons	72 (38.29%)
9	Forceful recruitment of members	62 (32.98%)

From the frequency on table 2, it is evident that some of the frequent violent activities in gangs are collective assault, intimidation of nonmembers, gossip, consumption of alcohol, sexual harassment and others.

**Gang violence and socio-emotional development**

**Question 2. What are the effects of gang violence on the socio-emotional development of secondary school students in Bamenda I Municipality?**

*Table 3:*

*Descriptive statistics on gang violence as a predictor of socio-emotional development*

Items	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Total SA & A	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree	Total D & SD	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Consumption of drugs by gang members negatively affects the students' ability to show empathy to others	100 (53.2%)	65 (34.6%)	165 (87.8%)	10 (5.3%)	13 (6.9%)	23 (12.2%)	1.61	.849	188
Consumption of alcohol by gang members negatively affects the students' ability to form healthy relationships with others	90 (47.9%)	58 (30.9%)	148 (79.2%)	12 (6.4%)	28 (14.9%)	40 (20.8%)	1.97	1.013	188
Students who are in a gang have difficulties controlling their own impulses and emotions	100 (53.2%)	60 (31.9%)	160 (85.1%)	8 (4.3%)	10 (5.3%)	18 (14.9%)	1.78	.865	188

Threats from gang members makes other students feel inferior	95 (50.5%)	50(26.6%)	145 (77.1%)	20 (10.6%)	23(12.2%)	43(22.9%)	1.96	.986	188
Students who are victims of gang activities develop low self esteem	100 (53.2%)	54(28.7%)	154 (81.9%)	20 (10.6%)	14(7.5%)	34(18.1%)	1.74	.813	188
Students who are involved in gang fights have difficulties making responsible decisions, considering the consequences of their actions	110 (58.5%)	58(30.9%)	168 (91.4%)	12 (6.4%)	8(4.2%)	20(8.6%)	1.72	.753	188

Table 3 indicates that majority (87.8%) of the respondents agreed that consumption of drugs by gang members negatively affects the students' ability to show empathy to others, while 12.2% of them disagreed. When the participants were asked whether consumption of alcohol by gang members negatively affects the students' ability to form healthy relationships with others, most (79.2%) of the respondents agreed with this opinion while 20.8% gave a contrary opinion.

The respondents were questioned if students who are in gangs have difficulties controlling their impulses and emotions, majority (85.1%) of them accepted while a few (14.9%) disagreed. The participants were asked if threats from gang members make other students feel inferior, most (77.1%) of the respondents agreed while 22.9% disagreed. Furthermore, when the participants were asked whether respondents who are victims of gang activities develop low self esteem, majority (81.9%) of the participants agreed while 18.1% denied. Finally, an overwhelming majority (91.4%) of the participants agreed that students who are involved in gang fights have difficulties making responsible decisions, considering the consequences of their actions, while 8.6% gave a contrary view. Following these submissions, it is clear most of the respondents held that gang violence significantly affects socio-emotional development of students.

In order to complement the quantitative responses from the respondents, an open ended question was asked to the respondents to describe how gang activities affect students' socio-emotional development.

The responses from the respondents indicate that gang violence leads to fear and anxiety; isolation; low self-esteem and inadequate emotional regulation. Some of the respondents indicated that gang activities cause them to live in constant fear and anxiety. One of them reported: "only the fact that I know there are some groups of students who bully and threaten other students in our school makes me afraid and anxious when they are around me. If you dare report them you are in trouble." Some indicated that constant fear and anxiousness make it difficult for them to regulate their emotions effectively. Others indicated that gang related violence or pressure make some students to develop aggressive tendencies since they know that they can be protected by their gang members. Some emphasized that they often use anger as a coping mechanism. Also, some of the participants said that gang related violence often create in them lack of trust and a pervasive sense of vulnerability which impacts their socio-emotional development. The interpretation of these themes revealed the potential consequences of gang activities on students' emotional self-regulation and mental health.

**Hypothesis testing**

H<sub>0</sub>: Gang violence has no significant effects on the socio-emotional development of secondary school students in Bamenda I municipality.

H<sub>a</sub>: Gang violence has a significant effect on the socio-emotional development of secondary school students in Bamenda I municipality.

**Table 3: Linear regression model for gang violence as a predictor of socio-emotional development**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	6.327	.725		8.732	.000	4.897	7.756		
Gangsterism	.168	.066	.184	2.550	.012	.038	.298	1.000	1.000

Dependent Variable: Socio-emotional development

A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between gang violence and socio-emotional development of students. The regression model was statistically significant,  $F(1, 186) = 6.500$ , and explained 25.5% ( $R^2 = .397$ ) of the variance in socio-emotional development. The adjusted  $R^2$  was .201, indicating that the model accounted for the variability in socio-emotional regulation. The constant was 6.327, suggesting the predicted value for socio-emotional development when gangsterism is at zero. The linear regression model analysis showed that gangsterism is a statistically significant predictor of socio-emotional development with p-values less than 0.05. The coefficients for gangsterism (.168) suggest that for every one-unit increase in gangsterism, socio-emotional development changes by .168. The model equation is therefore, socio-emotional regulation =  $.168 \text{ gangsterism} + 6.327$ . This means that gang violence has a significant effect on students' socio-emotional development in Bamenda I municipality.

**6. DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study indicate that gangs exist in the three selected schools. Their activities are usually exertion of physical violence, sexual abuse, verbal assault, gossip, intimidation, drug abuse, cyber bullying and use of weapons on non-members. This corroborates with the findings of Egley et al., (2014) who indicates that activities of gangs in school includes physical fights, verbal harassment, cyberbullying, drug abuse/trafficking, sexual harassment or the use of weapons to intimidate, harm, or assert dominance over other students, school staff or rival gang. When students are in gangs they feel that they have backup and this pushes them to incite violence with the hope that gang members will stand for them. These activities could cause fear and anxiety leading to low academic performance, dismissal from school and at extreme cases loss of lives. Some gangs go to the extent of harassing or physically assaulting their teachers in or out of schools as confirmed by the National Gang Center, 2021. From the findings of this study it is indicated that gang violence has detrimental effects on students' socio-emotional wellbeing. Students develop fear, anxiety and low self-esteem with the existence of gangs in school especially those



who have been victims of their activities. Some of these effects could gradually lead to school dropout when a student feels threatened by the gang members. This is in line with the findings of Bailey (2011), which shows that children who are exposed to gang violence experience increased levels of depression, anxiety, and aggression, an indication of negative socio-emotional development. High levels of fear and anxiety as a results of exposure to gang violence could lead to thoughts of suicide and self-harm among students. Additionally, the study found that exposure to gang violence had a negative impact on children's social skills, including their ability to make friends and to cooperate with others. These findings are in line with Krohn, et al., (2011) who opines that, gang affiliation is associated with a range of negative outcomes, including higher levels of depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems, lower academic achievement, and increased involvement in delinquent behavior. The findings also corroborates the study of Carlson & Esbensen (2017) in the United States which indicates that students who observe gang actions develop intense fear and aggressive behaviour which at times eventually contribute to school dropout. This confirms Bandura's (1977) theory which states that aggressive behaviour is learned through observation. This means that, students who witness or experience gang violence may imitate these behaviours and become more violent themselves or may develop negative emotional responses such as anxiety and depression. These findings show that gang violence has serious consequences on students' socio-emotional development and overall well-being.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study was designed to examine the features and activities of gang formations and their effects on students socio-emotional development in some public secondary school milieus within the Bamenda I municipality of Cameroon. Extant scholarship indicates that gang formation is inter alia caused by exposure to violence at home, the community, social influence, poverty, substance use and negative interpersonal relationship. Empirical findings corroborated with other related literature identified practices like intimidation, collective verbal and physical assault, gossip, substance abuse, sexual harassment and forceful recruitment of members as some defining features of violent activities perpetuated by gangs in school milieus. The investigation further reveals that these activities adversely affect students' socio-emotional development. This implies that exposure and vulnerability to gang violence besides endangering the physical well-being of students also significantly contributes to increased levels of depression, fear, anxiety, aggression, suicidal thoughts, and other negative psycho-social outcomes which could have a bearing on the learning process of students. This may be associated with, but not limited to, increase in school dropouts for both victims and perpetrators. Gang violence in school milieus is not only a threat to the safety of students. It has the potential to grievously disrupt the educational system, and feed the communities with gangs which may result to increased crime waves. Given the undesiring effects of the growing phenomenon, there is need for a multifaceted approach to mitigate gang violence in schools. This may require early intervention and proactive education programmes on gang activities by the school administration. This may solicit a more present and active counseling and psycho-social support initiatives in the school settings to provide sustainable interpersonal and empathetic skill sets to assist students deal with conflict situations. It might also necessitate a clearly formulated zero-tolerance disciplinary policy on acts of school violence. It is advised to complement these measures with security measures from public and/or private structures to contain gang excesses that might become too complex to handle within the school milieu. Parents remain critical partners in the civic and moral upbringing of their children. They should be

constantly reminded of this important role in forums like Parent-Teachers Association and other communication outlets especially the social media. It would also be worthwhile to employ the services of Counselors, psychologists and social workers to accompany them with parenting education guidelines that could help parents address the challenges of raising children especially in crime-ridden environments.

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