ABSTRACT

Introduction

Youth is a critical stage in life, full of challenges, confusions and insecurities. It is a phase that acts as a bridge between childhood and adulthood. It is a change-oriented and a ‘questioning’ phase and includes concepts like identity, role and dynamism. Soares (2000) defines youth as both a social concept created to define the particular way that human beings see themselves and others at a particular point in their lives, and a useful sociological concept.

Today, there is a crisis of confidence and feeling of unrest in large sections of youth in the country today. The issue of youth in crime is an area of increasing concern in the context of the fact that crime rates have been steadily rising in urban India. With liberalization and growth of a consumer economy, newer avenues in the illegal sector have emerged, which have direct absorption and income generating avenues for the educated and semi-educated youth.

Rationale

The dearth of research in India in the area of youth offender studies, and especially those involved in serious offences and organised crime, may stem from a general lack of focus in the country on youth as a social category. Criminal justice processing may convert young offenders into ‘criminals’. The consequent subsuming of identity could lead to obfuscation of valuable data about what happens to them, once they join the ranks of socially excluded populations in our society.

It is in this context that there is a need to look at who constitutes this group, what their profile is, what their experiences and views on the CJS are, and how they view their life chances. It is important to find ways to re-integrate this group in the mainstream, in the light of the fact that the illegal sector is ready and waiting to re-absorb them. These issues constitute largely the concerns of this study.

Objectives

1. To study the socio-economic, family, education and work background of the male youth offenders allegedly involved in property offences of serious nature.
2. To examine from the alleged male youth offenders’ viewpoint, the factors that contributed to his entry into the criminal nexus leading to his arrest and re-arrest and his views on family, peer and gender relations, religion and the criminal justice system and processing.

3. To study the social supports available to the youth prisoner to address his imprisonment related and post-release problems.

4. To understand the legal, social and livelihood-related processes that unfolds in the life of the alleged youth offender after his release from police/prison custody.

Methodology

This study is essentially qualitative in nature but uses a combination of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The attempt is to understand the lives of youth offenders who have a history of arrest/s by the police in cases related to extortion over time, from the insider’s perspective.

The Universe of this study is male youth in the age group of 18 to 30 years in the city of Mumbai and its suburbs, with a history of arrest/s related to cases of extortion against their name.

For arriving at the profile of the group, the structured interview method was used. Respondents for the interviews were initially identified from official data supplied by the Anti-Extortion Cell (AEC) of the Crime Branch, Mumbai Police. The sampling technique used was theoretical and convenience sampling method from the population of the youth offenders arrested in extortion related crimes.

Apart from these interviews, legal data pertaining to 89 youth arrested by the AEC of the Crime Branch, Mumbai Police for the years 2005, 2006 and 2007 was collected and quantitatively analyzed by using the SPSS package to understand the trends and patterns of arrests made by the AEC.

To understand reasons and the process of entry into the criminal nexus, the social supports available to the respondent youth to deal with arrest and post-arrest problems, his views on family, peer and gender relations, religion and the criminal justice system and processing and to study the processes that unfold in the post-arrest phase, in-depth interviews were used with
selected respondents. Nineteen life histories were developed on the basis of the in-depth interviews which were qualitatively analysed using narrative analysis.

**Review of literature**

A comprehensive survey of literature on criminological theories was carried out, as they have developed over time. This is followed by a review of literature on the effect of urbanisation processes on crime trends with specific reference to Mumbai city, followed by a brief review of literature on criminal justice system and process in India and its possible impact on youth.

This is followed by a survey of literature on the specific category of youth crime that this study aims to study, beginning with an introduction and concepts related to the professional criminal. This is followed by a discussion on what constitutes organised crime, its definition, history, nature, scope and magnitude of activities. Subsequently, there is a discussion on extortion as a form of organised crime. The chapter concludes with a discursive sub-section on youth gangs and youth involvement in organised crime.

The review of literature has highlighted the fact that while youth involvement in organised crime and gang behaviour in youth is a well researched subject in the West, there are very few studies on this issue in the Indian context. Some of the theories on crime causation such as the social disorganization and subculture theories of the Chicago School, the social attachments theory and the labelling theory of the radical school seem to emerge as having relevance to the urban youth crime scenario in India. Similarly, studies on organised crime, its changing nature and youth involvement in organised crime and gangs seem to co-relate with similar phenomena in the urban milieu, especially with a city like Mumbai.

The review of literature helped the researcher to firm up research questions and the objectives of the study, and was also very useful to develop the methods and tools of the research process.
Data analysis

More than half of youth arrested in extortion cases were between the age group of 18 to 24 years. Most of them were literate with a majority educated up to secondary level. Most of them were skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled workers in the informal sector. An overwhelming majority of the youth were unmarried or single.

Most youth arrested for extortion offences belonged to families settled in the city. The distribution of the residences of the youth arrested in extortion crimes in this study conforms to the social disorganization theory of Shaw and Mckay (1942), which propounded that the highest rates of delinquency are found in areas characterized by low rents in old dilapidated buildings, low family incomes and a high percentage of immigrant populations.

Most youth described their families as ‘normal’, i.e. absence of conflict between the parents. However, there were a few youth who came from families where conflict was a defining feature. The tensions and conflicts at home led to the youth remaining outside home for long hours each day or even leaving home altogether at an early age.

An interesting insight that can be gained from the family situation is that youth who came from conflict-ridden families were more deeply entrenched into gangs than those who gave relatively happier accounts of the family situation during their childhoods.

While majority of the youth belonged to working class and ‘normal’ areas, a few came from areas which corroborate Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960) descriptions of criminal or conflict sub-cultures. Those from criminal or conflict sub-cultures were found to be leading and organising extortion as an activity, were into extortion as a full-time activity and were part of the upper hierarchy of the gang.

The work place and the area or the neighbourhood have emerged as the two prime ‘scenes’ or sites of crime. Another site that has emerged in terms of cementing a youth life in crime is the prison environment, which acts as an ideal platform for criminalization of the youth, especially in the absence of strong family supports.

A significant percentage of the youth have revealed a history of arrests. However, most of these youth were arrested for the first time in cases related to group fights or violent incidents, and not extortion. Subsequent developments including imprisonment (for the first offence) led them to
extortion related crimes, thus corroborating Tannenbaum’s (1938) *labelling* theory Lemert’s (1951) theory of *primary and secondary deviance*.

It also emerges that most of the youth held rather traditional and patriarchal views with regard to gender relations, a humanistic and secular view of religion and a view about the role of the State advocating its protector (of the weak) and provider (of goods and services) functions. These perceptions create an image about the youth having ‘larger than life’ view of themselves and a very strong sense of ‘right and wrong’, justice and fair play.

Most of the youth had rather negative experiences with the criminal justice system. On a comparative scale, the police came across as the most negative followed by the prison. The image of the judiciary was mixed but it had negative connotations. The need to bring reforms in the criminal justice system emerged clearly.

The trigger for attempting to get out of crime is marked by the entry and presence of a person in the individual’s life, to whom he feels a strong sense of attachment and accountability. This finding corresponds with the *social attachment* theory propounded by Hirschi (1969), which linked offending behaviour to the level of commitment and attachment to belief in society. The death of a mother, the birth of a child, an ‘encounter’ with a police or prison officer or a social worker, or the period spent in prison are events that can prove to be turning points or life-changing incidents.

The entry of a social worker or a rehabilitation agency in the life of the individual has emerged as an important factor in one’s attempts to get out of crime. The role of the police and prolonged association with gangs can have a positive and/or negative impact on the youth as far as chances of getting out are concerned.

Finding stable and ‘meaningful’ employment is an important indicator of rehabilitation. Finally, finding supportive relationships outside the immediate family and the lived environment of the youth and getting involved in social work are good indicators of rehabilitation.

**A theoretical discussion**

There are three *sites of criminalisation* of individuals as already discussed above. These are (1) the area of residence or the neighbourhood which corroborates the *conflict or criminal* sub-cultures described by Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960), propounded in their *sub-*
culture theory; (2) the work place characterised by an informal sector which offers a range of jobs for individuals coming from poor education and semi-skilled or skilled backgrounds and (3) the prison environment which leads to prisonisation of individuals. Let us call the first two as primary and the third as secondary criminalising site.

These sites are marked by routine law violations, flourishing of illegal practices and exploitation by the powerful individuals and/or interest groups. They offer opportunities for ‘acting out’ behaviour and have the capacity to absorb the tensions within individuals, by directing their energies in a crimogenic direction. There are recruiting agents who are part of the criminal nexus and are connected with criminal elements or gangs.

There may be some manifest factors in an individual youth’s life such as family conflict, dropping out of school due to financial problems, peer influence leading to lifestyle problems, addictions, and personality factors such as anger outbursts and need to prove oneself.

These manifest factors often appear to be the cause for the person’s entry into crime. However, in the absence of the criminalising sites, the manifest factors do not find expression in the individual’s life in terms of criminal behaviour. There is an inter-play of manifest factors with the either one or more of the criminalising sites, leading youth into crime.

However, while making attempts to get out of crime, it is the manifest factors which become primary and significant compared to the criminalising sites. The sites are hurdles to be contended with, and are difficult to cross without family supports, re-education, employment, counseling, determination and emotional maturity and presence of a social worker. These factors are related to the manifest factors and have a crucial bearing on the outcome of the getting out process.

It has emerged that extortion is largely a group offence (as opposed to an individual crime) and therefore needs to be viewed as an illegal activity embedded in the political economy rather than as an aberration of individual behaviour with psychological overtones. The study reveals that extortion per se and as a form of gang-related activity is on the decline in Mumbai city. This
could be linked to the crackdown by the police on violent gang activities in the nineties, the application of tough laws like the MCOCA and the changing nature of criminal or illegal activities of gangs in the last decade or so.

The history of criminal gangs reveals that the first generation of gangs started off and built the foundations of their organisations through violent crimes such as extortions and *supari* (contract) killings. These gangs invested the money earned through extortions and *supari* killings into subsidiary illegal businesses such as land grab, betting and gambling rackets, and illicit liquor trade. A few also diversified into drug trafficking and fake currency rackets. These gangs flourished during the eighties and nineties and built large and expanded empires.

They developed contacts with business partners and started or invested in legal businesses such as real estate, films and the stock markets to further strengthen their organisation and financial power. This financial power helped them to build a nexus with those in power – the police, local officials and politicians who now form powerful cartels which are mutually beneficial to all parties concerned. As this process gained pace, gangs have increasingly changed from an ‘actor’ orientation to a ‘network’ orientation.

This shift in their activities has led to leaner organisations with upper echelons in the hierarchy becoming agents and wheeler-dealers, but backed by a small team of youth who can be asked to use force if and when required. In the changed scenario, the predominant and violent face of crime in the *megapolis* whose protagonist was the dreaded gangster is giving way to an image of the criminal who is corrupt and violates laws and procedures with impunity, in collusion with vested interests for financial gain.