

# **Rapid Situation Assessment of Gangs in Male'**

Maldives 2012



**The Asia Foundation**



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**Published by:** The Asia Foundation

**Implementing Agency:** Maldives Institute for Psychological Services, Training and Research

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First published in August 2012

We thank all the gang leaders and members that met with us and supported the study by sharing their experience and insights on why youth join gangs. We are also grateful to them for introducing the research team to the various gangs in Male and facilitating the meetings in locations of their choice. We acknowledge the cooperation offered and seek to continue this positive dialogue that this study has initiated with gangs. We would also like to thank the coffee shops where meetings were hosted and acknowledge the support of the Department of National Planning in guiding the research.

## List of Abbreviations

DPRS	Department of Penitentiary and Rehabilitation Services
DRP	Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (Maldivian Peoples Party)
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
Foundation	The Asia Foundation
Ganja	Cannabis
JUMHOORI	Republican Party
Kathivalhi	A traditional heavy duty knife used to chop trees
MDP	Maldivian Democratic Party
MNDF	Maldives National Defense Force
MNSS	Maldives National Security Services
MRf	Maldivian Rufiyaa
Nite10	Nitrazepam
NVS	National Values Survey
PPM	Progressive Party of Maldives
Theyo	Local term for cannabis
TVM	Television Maldives
UK	United Kingdom
USD	United States Dollar

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## Executive Summary

Gang violence in the Maldives is becoming increasingly commonplace and the nature of violence more brutal as new types of drugs and weapons are used. There are reportedly between 20 and 30 different gangs operating in Male' with 50 to 400 members in each group. According to the National Values Survey (NVS) conducted by The Asia Foundation (Foundation) in 2011, residents of Male' see gang violence as a key challenge facing the city and even gang members themselves have expressed concern about the escalating violence. Gang violence impacts almost all citizens of the capital in one way or another. Businesses and neighbourhoods frequently have property damaged during gang violence; youth congregate in public areas, often using drugs and starting fights; and during political rallies gangs are seen on the streets causing chaos.

Causes of gang violence cannot be readily distinguished from broader problems relating to social welfare. The current research shows that although young people are at the forefront of gang violence, they are not entirely to blame and there are many factors that drive youths to join gangs and participate in gang violence. As revealed in the NVS,<sup>1</sup> a widespread breakdown in family structures has begun to lead young people to look for new ways of belonging in an effort to replace the security and structure of a family. Young people often turn to drugs to get away from their family problems, which contributes to their ending up in a gang.

Weak democratization in some areas also plays a key role in furthering gang activity. According to gang members, gangs are often propped up by actors with political and business interests who readily exploit gangs to achieve their aims. This means that participation in gangs has become an easy path for young people seeking to earn a living—in an environment where many face difficulties in finding employment. Further to this, the police and the broader justice system are viewed by many as furthering problems for youth by handing out harsh sentences and criminal records for minor offences. In general it might be observed that there is increasing disillusionment among young people that democracy can provide a solution to the country's problems as the political leaders themselves are seen to be embroiled in perpetuating undemocratic practices.

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<sup>1</sup> This research also builds on the NVS data and points out how community attitudes towards violence that were uncovered in the NVS (i.e. high acceptance of the use of force to achieve certain aims) are played out among youth involved in gangs as they show high tolerance for the use of violence and many admit, often without remorse, to carrying out heinous violent acts.

## 1. Introduction

Despite the proliferation of gangs in recent years and the increase in gang violence, there is limited research on the nature of gangs, their operation, motivations and funding sources. This research, conducted by local researchers in the Maldives with support from The Asia Foundation, seeks to fill that gap by presenting a general study of gangs in Male' that adds to our understanding of the nature of gang activity in order to inform future interventions to curtail gang violence.<sup>2</sup>

This research presents the structure and main features of Maldivian gangs, and shares analysis of gang violence, the historical roots of gangs. In addition discussion is presented on the reasons that drive people to join gangs, including the need to belong/brotherhood; need for protection, identity, economic factors and unemployment, drugs, bullying at school and family issues. Following analysis of the internal workings of gangs, the research turns to understanding how gangs are interacting with and connecting to broader elements of society. This starts with a discussion on how labeling by the community, media and police play a role in shaping gangs, and moves on to consider the role of political and business actors in providing support to gangs as well as analyze the impact of police actions and prison on gang members. Finally the study concludes with discussion of the Anti- Gang Violence Law and the role of religious leaders, leading to recommendations for interventions to address gang violence.

Gang development in the Maldives is a relatively new phenomenon and as a result has not been studied in depth. There have been findings, however, from research carried out in other countries that is useful to understand the development and dynamics of gang behaviours. A body of literature exists that help explain why young people get involved in gangs, with explanations ranging from gangs rewarding youth for criminal behaviour, the importance of bonding and social empowerment through participating in gangs, as well as a feeling of exclusion from society.<sup>3</sup> Another set of theories relate involvement in gangs as a means to improve socio-economic standing in society, with youths aiming to be socially mobile through criminal acts, or to earn money if they see no prospects in the formal economy.<sup>4</sup>

Other useful literature that was reviewed to inform this study included theories relate to the learning of criminal behaviour from society, as well as the influence of weak education on youth criminal and gang activities.<sup>5</sup> The effect of society labelling youths and pushing them to more criminal activity through stigmatism is also useful to consider.<sup>6</sup> All of the research reviewed contributed to the research teams' analysis of the dynamics, development of gangs

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<sup>2</sup> This research was limited only to the study of gangs in Male' city and was a qualitative study. Furthermore, secondary data and data from the criminal justice system were not analysed.

<sup>3</sup> See *Social Learning Theory* (Williams & McShane, 1999); *Social Development Theory* (Hawkins, 1998); and *Social Disorganization Theory* (Spergel, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> See *Subculture Theory* (Cohen, 1995; Williams & McShane, 1999) and *Strain Theory* (Goldstein, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> See *Differential Association Theory* (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978) and *Underclass Theory* (Cohen, 1969; Wilson, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> See *The Labelling Theory* (Williams & McShane, 1999).

and factors that promote gang violence among Maldivian gangs. Annex III provides further information on the literature review conducted.

### **i. Research Location and Methodology**

This research was primarily conducted in Male', the capital city of the Republic of Maldives. Male' is a densely populated city with 103,693 people living in 14,107 households (the total population of Maldives is 298,968 with 32087 households). While 51 percent of the total population are classified as youths (18 to 35 years old); 60 percent of the total population is under 25 years of age (2006 census data).

This small city of 579.8 hectares is divided into six wards, Henveiru, Galolhu, Maafannu and Machangolhi, located in Male' island; and in Villingili and Hulhumale', which are nearby islands that are now considered as wards of the Male' city. Major facilities providing health care, education, as well as social and economic organizations and most of the country's employment opportunities are all concentrated in Male'.

Researchers collected data through 20 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with gang members or members of groups labelled as gangs that had a total of 131 participants. The FGD participants represented five different wards of Male'. The majority of FGD participants reside in Maafannu (48.1%) followed by participants from Machangoalhi (22.1%), Henveiru (13%), HulhuMale (13%), and Galolhu (6.9%).

In addition, 24 in-depth interviews with gang members or people labelled as gang members were carried out. The research team first interviewed key gang members who then helped to organize meetings with different gangs from randomly selected areas. The research team then visited the preferred location of gang members or met with them in the research team's office. In a snowballing method, gang members then gave referrals of other gang members that could be interviewed. The relationship between the research team and gang members allowed the team to get detailed descriptions of gangs along with socio-demographic data from gang members taking part in FGDs. The 24 in-depth interviews with gang members provided further information on the nature of gangs and the factors that led individuals into gangs and gang violence.

## 2. What Does a Maldivian Gang Look Like?

There are between 20 and 30 different gangs operating in Male' and gang sizes range from 50 to 400 members. Most members are under the age of 25 years and often first joined gangs while in school. Older members usually take up the position of gang leaders. The most common type of gang is exclusively male, with high rates of drug abuse, unemployment and a high percentage of members with a criminal record. More often than not the gang is willing to receive money to carry out violent crimes on behalf of politicians or business people.

*"You can't compare us (Maldivian gangs) to the ones in the UK or to other countries. We are very different...Maldivian gang violence can be much more brutal and frequent as this is a small community and people can't hide in places for that long."*

**Gang member**

This profile of the typical gang member was largely confirmed during focus group discussions. Sixty-three percent of participants are currently unemployed and 52 percent have never been employed. The average monthly income among those who are employed is MRF 9238 (USD 607). Of those who report being employed 19 percent report that they consider selling; smuggling or peddling drugs as a form of employment. A majority of the FGD participants reported that their police records created difficulties in obtaining gainful employment. A large number of FGD participants use and/or sell drugs. Fifty-four percent of the FGD participants reported they were currently using drugs and 44 percent of participants reported that they were engaged in the sale of drugs. Sixty-three percent of participants reported having been detained by the police at some point. Amongst those detained, 38 percent have served a prison sentence, and 18 percent reported having been released from the prison under conditions of parole, presidential pardon or under the 'Second Chance' opportunity.

A less common type of gang is one that does not receive money to carry out violent crimes. These groups do not define themselves as gangs but rather just as a group and some dislike even being referred as a group because it can mean they are tarred with the same brush as violent gangs. In many cases such groups are legally registered organizations or sports clubs.

*"We cannot go to all the places in Male'. If we go we might be attacked...this restricts us from getting an education, if the college is near a gang area where we cannot enter we cannot go to the college due to fear of being attacked."*

**Gang member**

They point out, however, that they are labelled by the police or the community as a gang because they congregate in large groups. This stigmatization leads to them being harassed by the police or community; thus undermining their ability to make a positive contribution to the community.

Most gangs are territorial and their members generally come from the same neighbourhood. Some gangs have what is referred to as a "green



passport,” which allows them to freely move around any neighbourhood in Male’ without fear of being attacked. Members from many gangs, however, cannot go into certain neighbourhoods controlled by rival gangs.

Younger gang members are the most vulnerable within gangs. They are used by gang leaders to carry out the gang’s dirty work, such as selling drugs and alcohol, inflicting harm on others and vandalizing property. Judges have the discretion to deliver a more lenient sentence with regard to most criminal offences committed by offenders who are 16 years old or younger and gang leaders exploit this fact by using minors to carry out crimes.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> S.7, Penal Code of the Maldives, Act No. 1/81.

### 3. Gang Violence

During the study gang members expressed concern about the increasing frequency and severity of gang violence. They were of the opinion that many of the gangs did not value life and people were being killed merely for belonging to a particular gang or political affiliations. Fifty-two percent of focus group participants had been victims of violence in the past and 54 percent reported personally engaging in gang violence. Only 21 percent of participants had ever sought the support of a mental health professional for issues surrounding violence.

*“Before we went out to attack...not to kill, but now... we use Nite 10; 30-40 tablets of 10mg each, drink alcohol and smoke cannabis, then we are numbed out and feel no pain when we kill.”*  
**Gang member**

*“Each gang wants its members to have more bikes, expensive jewelry such as neck chains; expensive T shirts, have a car, the latest mobile phones; we will do anything to have those.”*  
**Gang member**

The use of violence seems to be the result of seven main factors and causes. First, the most frequent cause of violence is gang members seeking revenge for perceived slights or previous disputes. A

*“If one of the gang members is harmed or killed...we will have it in our hearts forever...we will only get peace if we take revenge...we will only be satisfied when we have killed the person.”*  
**Gang member**

member can be attacked for belonging to a particular gang, living in the same neighbourhood as the gang, or to settle an old score between members, families or other gangs. A second factor fuelling violence is drug and alcohol abuse, which turns into petty disputes, such as rivalry over girlfriends or verbal abuse, which escalate into violent conflicts.<sup>8</sup> Previously gang members mostly engaged in fist fights, but increasingly gang violence involves the use of knives.

**Case of Mistaken Identity:** *Abdul Muheeth or ‘Bobby’ aged 21, was murdered on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2012. He was stabbed near his house. He was stabbed by a gang of eight people and died with approximately 17 stab wounds after three hours of being stabbed. He was mistaken for a member of another gang. Bobby was talking to another boy when the gang members arrived. They did not even look at his face. The gangsters arrived by bikes. They parked the bikes, walked up to him and stabbed him. They named him as a member of another gang. They stabbed and left. They carried beret and kathivalhi. They stabbed him on the leg, four times on the back, neck, head, sides and numerous slashes. This happened at 0150hrs. He was not a member of any gang. He was a guy who had a regular job and was mostly in and out of Male’, but when he was in Male’ he enjoyed hanging out with his friends. Source: relatives of Bobby-Abdul Muheeth*

<sup>8</sup> Often homemade liquor is preferred because it is much more economical than standard liquor.

As will be discussed further below the third cause is commissioned violence in which a politician or business person pays gangs to carry out violent acts. A fourth cause of violence is sport competitions turning violent. According to one group, “if there is a fight after a football match, it is just a fight. A fight due to *baibalaa* (a local sport) is a gang fight - because a lot of gangs take part in this sport.” The fifth cause relates to competition over material goods that give the impression of a more affluent lifestyle and serve as status symbols, such as bikes, mobile phones and cash. The quality and quantity of such material goods determine the status of the gang. Members often engage in violence and other criminal activities to gain monetary and material benefits.

The sixth cause is violence related to self preservation. Whenever a gang member is attacked the whole gang gets involved in the process of retaliation, this threat of escalation helps protect individual gang members. The seventh factor relates to a gang’s desire to be seen as the most powerful and dangerous. Often, the desire to gain such a status prompts gang members to indulge in violence for the sake of violence, and sometimes they carry out violent acts while intoxicated, resulting in the murder of innocent people. Some members reported that even if such a killing is a result of mistaken identity, the perpetrators, across all gangs, are accorded the status of being powerful or dangerous and the members automatically rise in the gang’s hierarchy.

#### 4. Historical Roots of Gangs

Gang members report various reasons for the emergence of gangs in the Maldives. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the historical roots to the development of gangs are linked in part to the introduction of heroin by foreigners in the early 1990s. Although Cannabis was available in Male’ as early as the late 1970s, this did not lead to use of drugs in groups. Gang members report that in the early 1990s foreigners (purportedly Indians) gave away free packets of heroin (locally called brown sugar) that contained directions for use. Once people were addicted to the drug it was no longer free and they were forced to spend, initially MRF 50 (USD 3) and later MRF 300 (approximately USD 20) for a hit. Subsequently drug users, through involvement in gangs, supported their drug habits by the sale of drugs and other criminal activities.

*“In 1976 cannabis was brought to Male’ by hippies. A high government official at that period called me and asked me to check out who was selling it, what was sold and places in Male’ in which it was sold. I found out that it was being sold by six people in Male’. One man showed it to me, a very small piece of ganja. At that time a piece was being sold at MRf 250. I bought two pieces for MRf 500 and went to meet the high government official and gave it to him. He examined it and asked me to return it to the person who sold it to me and to tell him never to sell it to any Maldivian. The Maldivian drug law was drawn later in 1977.”*

**Senior citizen**

According to gang members there was also a sudden escalation in the number of gangs in Male' following the death of a prisoner in Maafushi jail in 2003. This led to a rapid increase in violent activities.

A further reason cited for the increase in number of gangs was the formulation of political parties as political actors sought to increase their influence and power by aligning their parties with certain gangs. In addition some members associated the increase in the number of gangs in Male' to the 2004 prison riots (an incident where the Maldives National Security Service (MNSS) waged a violent crackdown on demonstrators protesting the jailing of reformists). The oppressive strategies used by the MNSS inspired citizens to gangs as a means to retaliate.

## 5. Reasons Why People Join Gangs

There are various reasons why people join gangs and each member has a unique pathway into a gang. These include a need to belong and for a sense of brotherhood, identity, protection, economic/employment, drugs, community issues and bullying at school.

### i. Need to Belong and Brotherhood

*“Been in the group ever since I can remember... My brother was in this group. I love this group... it is better than my own family...I have gained lifelong friends... They are there whenever I need them... I do not think I will ever leave this group...”*

**Gang member**

Many gang members express a desire to belong as a key reason why they join gangs. A common feeling is that the gang is ‘like a family.’ They say that members in the gang take care of each other, share each other’s problems and are there through the good times and the bad times, thus playing a role in their lives similar to that of family members.

*“I had a very rough family... had many problems...my Dad used to beat me up. One time my Dad was so mad at me that he stepped on my neck...I see the gang as my family... they are much better...”*

**Gang member**

Gang members point out that by joining the gang they always have people they can depend on and if they left the gang nobody would be there for them. Thus, they

see no alternative social safety net other than the gang if something goes wrong. Their own

*“I actually joined the gang after I got stabbed...In 2009, I was on my way from football practice when I got stabbed.... the people who stabbed me thought I was in a gang... I was not in the gang then... after that I joined the gang...”*

**Gang member**

family structures are often broken and wracked with domestic violence. Family members are often seen as unreliable which means the gang offers a more stable social structure.

Gang members also describe being in the gang as providing them with a sense of brotherhood. Thus supporting the *Social Development Theory* (Hawkins, 1998) that youth join gangs because their friends are in

gangs and they form a brotherly bond replacing the intimacy and support that they might otherwise get in their families.

## ii. Protection

Related to the desire for belonging and brotherhood another commonly cited reason for joining gangs is for protection. Younger kids see older gang members as having a large group of friends to provide protection against threats. Hence, in line with Hawkins's theory, they join gangs because they seek the perceived safety and protection that comes with the status of being a gang member.

Often the need for protection comes about because a young person (usually a male) lives in a certain area and is labelled as a gang member and thus unwittingly becomes a target for other gang members. Another reason why a youth might seek protection is if he is under threat of revenge from another gang due to the actions of a relative. For example, one gang member

*"If the DPRS (Department of Penitentiary and Rehabilitation Services) person knows that the particular person belongs to a gang he might not beat that person too much or might not even do anything because he is scared of the gang."*

**Gang member**

said, "If a father knifes a person, his kids will have to be very careful because someone might just want to take revenge on them because of their father...so it's a never ending cycle...these kids will have to join a gang for their protection." A gang member in another group said that "there is another younger generation (younger than 14-15) ready to join (gangs)." Gang members also often feel that they need protection from the police and feel harassed as they have been labelled as gang members. Also when taken to prison, members feel that if they belong to a gang they will be beaten less by police.

According to some gang members it is safer to sell drugs if they belong to a gang. If an individual is selling drugs and is not connected to a gang it is easy for others to use violence to steal their drugs or clientele.

## iii. Identity

The search for identity is another key factor driving young people to join gangs. With the backdrop of the Maldives becoming a middle income country where many people are

*"I always wanted to join a gang...It was kind of a dream... you see in movies how gangsters live... Looks like a cool way of life..."*

**Gang member**

benefitting from economic development, the young generation also want a share of modern life and the material and status benefits that it can offer. Gang members point out

*"I have tried to get a real job but I have not had any luck. Being in the gang allows me to earn some money. If I get a proper job I will leave the gang life."*

**Gang member**

that they "want to look cool and have many expensive and modern things" and joining a gang is a fast track to

being perceived as cool and having the resources to access modern items (such as better motorbikes) and a more affluent life style. Thus, in line with the *Subcultural Theory*, youths join gangs and adjust to a criminal life style to form a specific identity (Cohen, 1995).

Another factor in establishing identity is the high social status accorded to gang members that wage violence.<sup>9</sup> Youth place high social value on appearing to be powerful and to being ‘someone that people should fear.’ In addition to this, there is a correlation between appearing to be cool and willingness to be violent. As one group of gang members said, “to be cool (i.e. socially acceptable and trendy) is to be brave enough to hurt someone with a knife.”

#### **iv. Unemployment and Insufficient Salaries**

It is evident from the data that unemployment is a major factor in driving youth into gangs.

Gang members report that even with their Advance-levels they cannot find employment. A significant barrier to employment for many gang members is the existence of a police record. In order to check whether a prospective employee has a criminal record, the law allows employers to access existing police records of job applicants. Even a brief police detention will lead to a five-year police record. One gang member says, “A police record is easy to get and hard to get rid of.” According to gang members a person can get a police record even if they are below 18 years of age, making it hard for them to find a job when they are older. Gang members state that further reasons why it is hard to find work is that foreigners (Indians and Bangladeshis) are taking up all the jobs that they would otherwise be qualified for.

*“Due to police record we can’t get a government job... when government does this, the private sector usually does the same. Hence it’s hard to get a job if a person has a police record... so join a gang to earn money... need money to live.”*

**Gang member**

According to gang members salaries in available jobs are not sufficient to cover living costs. For example, they argue, a person needs to earn MRF 5,000 (\$328) a month to live and support their families and ordinary jobs do not pay this much—the minimum wage in Maldives is MRF 2,600 (\$170). Through involvement in gang activities, however, members can easily earn MRF 5,000 or more a month.

Another issue is what several gangs referred to as the ‘lost age group.’ These are people aged 16-17, who do not continue on to do their Advance-levels either because their Ordinary-level results were insufficient or they do not want to study and are considered unattractive for employment until they turn 18. This makes them susceptible to gang life as they are in limbo between school and the preferred employment age.

*“A young person might get police record for the smallest of things...e.g., yelling at a policeman [or] not listening to a policeman.”*

**Gang member**

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<sup>9</sup> As pointed out in the *National Values Survey*, 2010 the social acceptability of violence in the Maldives is high and the young population is not immune to this.

Another problem relates to gap between the salaries at available jobs and changing lifestyle expectations. Being in a gang allows members to earn more money and support more affluent lifestyles. This supports the *Strain Theory* which suggests that youth join gangs because they want a better lifestyle but are unable to achieve this through legitimate work (Goldstein, 1991). For example, one gang member suggests, “the salary for people who have just left school (*maybe MRF 2500 or \$164 per month*) is not sufficient to maintain their lifestyle. A single contract job undertaken as a member of the gang would earn them a much higher income than a monthly salary. This is easy money and they do not have to be at the office for 8-10 hours.” For example, to break a shop window a gang member can get paid MRF 20,000 (\$1310), which is four times the monthly salary of a school leaver.

Some gangs, however, are having a positive influence when it comes to employment. One gang reported that it operates as a kind of recruitment agency where members make efforts to find legitimate jobs for others, such as in a garage or in projects. Thus, the gang appears to have a positive effect in helping members find employment.

*“We try and help the younger generation... Show them the right path...we are very proud of this...some members have respectable posts in government and some run their own business”*  
**Gang member**

## **v. Drug Abuse**

It is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of the link between drug use and gangs. Most of the gangs interviewed for this research claimed that the majority of their members use drugs. Most gangs, however, were against using pills (such as Nite10) and hard drugs (such as brown sugar/heroin) but cannabis and alcohol use is extensive and acceptable amongst the

*“I personally sell drugs in the gang...I run it as a business...I have four members working for me... we do shift work.. I give a lot of the money I earn from selling drugs to the gang.”*

**Gang member**

members. A minority of the gangs that participated in this study have a strict policy of no drug use; they will not allow new members in if they use drugs and isolate anyone who starts using drugs. It should be noted that many gang members do not consider smoking cannabis and alcohol abuse as using drugs. Therefore, use of soft drugs is prevalent across majority of gangs.

While some of the gang members were introduced to drug use before they joined gangs, others were initiated into gangs before their introduction to drugs. One gang member reported, “I joined the gang in 2009 at 20 years of age. I was using drugs then and was going to this area to use drugs and then I joined my friend’s friends who were in a gang.” This explanation is in line with the *Differential Association Theory* which states that criminal behaviour is learnt through the social groups the youth belongs to (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978).

Many members utilize the gang to establish drug selling businesses. They rely on the gang network to ensure access to drugs and to gain protection from the police. Other members

imply that there is a more sinister relationship between drugs and gangs. They claim that politicians and businessmen often offer drugs and alcohol when they (gang members) complete an illegal task set by these politicians and businessmen. Hence, there is a reciprocal relationship between gang members and politicians and businessmen; gang members get easy access to drugs and alcohol, while politicians and businessmen

*“It is my fantasy to possess a gun, I had once saw a small pistol, I had it under my bike seat, it was planted but I returned it (I knew who it belonged to), that day when I saw the pistol I was so scared, but now I want a gun and I frequently fantasize of going on a killing spree, I have in my mind all those whom I will kill.”*

**Gang member**

get their dirty work done by the gang members. This finding fits well with *Social Learning Theory* (Williams & McShane, 1999), which states that behaviour is learned through reinforcement and punishment. Criminal behaviour among youth is reinforced by receiving drugs and money from the politicians and businessmen for the crimes they commit.

Members believe that inadequate rehabilitation services for people convicted of drug-related offences lead to complications when they are released from jail. These offenders are stigmatized by their prison sentence and find it difficult to get and maintain jobs. When they are released from jail they often struggle to reintegrate into the community and they start using drugs again, which either push them back into gangs or lead them into gangs for the first time. One gang member summed up, “People do not give offenders, addicts, gang members a second chance... once they get labelled it is hard to get back into the community... they cannot start a life as no one would give them a job, no parent will allow their daughter to go out with them.”

Drugs clearly play a strong role in luring people into gangs and perpetuating gang violence. Members depend on the easy and greater income they can earn in a gang to pay for drugs and thus they become dependent on parties willing to pay them to wage violence.

## **vi. Bullying at School**

A number of members belonging to gangs mentioned that they join gangs to get revenge for being bullied at school. According to one of the members interviewed, often teachers are not

*“Someone hit me when I was in school and I told him that I would hit too when I get the power... four years later, I met that person (at that time I was in the gang)... I hit him with so much anger.”*

**Gang member**

aware of what is happening in class, and even if they know they do not do much about it.

Also members report that discrimination between poor and rich kids often isolates and increases resentment among kids whose parents are not so wealthy. When these kids grow up they often join gangs

to overcome feelings of powerlessness and inferiority that began at school.



## vii. Family Issues

As stated earlier, family problems play a significant role in youth involvement in gangs. A number of gang members interviewed revealed that they joined gangs after their parents divorced or after the death of a parent. In a majority of the cases if the parent is divorced, a single parent and most often the mother, takes care of the children while also working. This often leads to the mother not being able to give the attention the children require as she has to remain away from the family for long hours at work. The children then join a gang to get the comfort and support lacking at home.

*“Dad passed away when I was eight. I started to hang out on the road after he passed away...joined this group soon afterwards.”*

**Gang member**

## 6. Role of Community, Media and Police in Shaping Gangs

Many gang members hold the belief that the community, media and police play a significant part in creating gangs by defining loose groups of people as gangs regardless of whether they are involved in criminal acts or not. In some cases groups of neighbourhood boys who socialize together are labelled

*“Society doesn’t accept us so we join gangs... gangs accept us, gang members accept us irrespective of what we may do”*

**Gang member**

*“Media may show our pictures on national TV...Say we are just hanging around without a job... but we have jobs... just hanging out on our free time to chill”*

**Gang member**

by the community and police as gangs. Members argue that the police identify them as a gang and the media then reports that they are gang members. This leads to all kinds of implications including difficulties with families, challenges in getting employment, stigmatization and inadvertent involvement in gang violence.

Further to this, gang members argue that once they get labelled as gang members the community does not give them a chance to redeem themselves. For example, one gang member states, “Once a person makes a mistake he is then labelled for life, the whole community will isolate him and he will be treated like a criminal for the rest of his life.” This is in line with the *Labelling Theory*, which states that the society creates criminals by labelling them (Williams & McShane, 1999).

Some members explain that there are several types of discrimination in the Maldivian community. A person might be judged by the way they dress, their hairstyle, or the company they keep. According to some members interviewed, if a person dresses in a certain way he might be labelled as a drug addict even though he is not. However, if a person looks

*“Even if we did not do anything... the police takes us to the police station... and may be taken in front of a judge... the judge might say “he is a threat to the society” then we get labeled as a bad person...”*

**Gang member**

*“A bunch of students from Majeediyya (a high school in Male’) were expelled from school. Some of the expelled students were allowed to return to school others tried to go back to school but the school didn’t let them in. Some of them even went to the Education Ministry but it was of no help... all the students who got expelled and were not allowed to rejoin the schools are now in different gangs in the Maldives.”*

**Gang member**

decent, or is affluent the community does not look down on them. This finding relates to *Social Disorganization Theory*, which implies that lack of social connectedness leads to gang initiation (Spergel, 1995).

## 7. Role of Political and Business Actors

Many gangs receive income through exchanges with political actors or business people and only a minority of gangs refuse to accept money in this way. The exchange is usually in the form of money, or sometimes alcohol, given to gangs to participate in political protests, start political riots, destroy property or injure a third party. Money is often given to a gang to initiate a fight so as to divert media attention from a political issue.

*“For example, politicians have asked us to cut the TVM cable for MRf 25 000, to light up a bus for Rf 10 000. Also in the recent political riots we were involved in things like burning the garbage collection area. We were given some amount of money, two of us and the ten people who accompanied us were paid some amount, we had to set fire and run from the spot and be seen in another area. We got paid to do this by a political group. Sometimes in return for the work we do, we also get to party in their safari boats with girls and alcohol.”*

**Gang member**

Businessmen will also use gang members to scare business relations into paying money owed. Politicians or businessmen generally only deal directly with the gang leader and the amount of money exchanged is known only to the gang leader. The member who carries out the contract receives a small portion of the money. Leaders can sometimes get a monthly income of up to MRF 1 million (USD 65,000) for being on call to carry out a politicians ‘dirty work.’

*“To make more money we need to do more damage... the price for breaking a shop’s front glass pane is MRf 20 000... we are also assured that we will be released from jail/custody if caught.”* **Gang member**

In extreme cases gang members are given contracts to carry out murder. One member said, “We may be given a file with all the information about the person and be told we may be paid in millions to carry out the killing.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that many gang members are concerned about this and want it to stop.

Often the relationships with politicians become co-dependent. Some of the gang members depend on the politicians for protection from law enforcement agencies while the politician depends on the gang to suppress opponents or carry out other tasks that help maintain his popularity. The gang also has information about the politician's illegal dealings that could be used for blackmail.

*“Democracy is not working... people do not know what democracy is... even politicians do not know what it really is... there is too much freedom... people do not know how to use this freedom”*

**Gang member**

Female gang members are sometimes used to blackmail political or business opponents. Gang leaders may contract women to sleep with the opponent and make video tapes which are used for blackmail purposes. Sometimes female members are used for prostitution, in order to make additional income for the gang.

Some gang members argue that the increase in violence among gangs is a result of the availability of funding from political parties (PPM, DRP, Jumhoori, and MDP are frequently cited).

It is important to note the levels of distrust and disrespect that gang members have for politicians. This has implications for young generation's ongoing support for a democratic system. Members have limited faith that democracy will actually bear any fruit when they witness first hand corruption on the part of their political representatives.

## 8. Role of Police and Prison

*“I was handcuffed and kept like that for 6 months...”*

**Gang member**

Gang members unsurprisingly have a hostile attitude toward police. This is related to unfair labelling (as mentioned above), strong punishments, the effect of police records and abuse on the part of the police.

Police records and/or time in jail/detention encourage involvement in gang activities. Many members say that they initially joined the gang because they could not get a job due to their police record. They claim that, in many cases, the offence was as minor as driving a motorbike without a license and yet they still had a police record for five years.

Added to this is a perception that the judges are not fair in their sentencing. Gang members feel that some people get a lighter sentencing or get released from jail just because their parents are perceived as respectable people, or because the gang member or the gang has good connections with the judge or the government.

There are also reports of severe torture including beatings, being stripped of their clothes and being tied to trees. Added to this, there are reports that members are detained by police for extended periods of time without charges. This further fuels their hatred for police and disrespect towards the law, justifying their involvement in violent gang activities.

Furthermore, members report that while serving jail time they are often locked up with hardened criminals and by the time they get out of jail they have the resources to commit major crimes. There is no categorization of prisoners in the Maldivian prisons (UNDP, 2011). Young adults who are in jail for minor crimes learn from experienced criminals. In addition to this, members report that gangs are operating from inside the prison and their activities reflect gang activity outside. Jailed members, thus, are maintaining communication with their counterparts outside.

Many of the gangs believe that the police force acts as a gang. It is a common perception of members belonging to gangs that police operate as gang members by wearing masks and attacking innocent people in crowd situations and also during arrests.

## 9. Impact of Anti Gang Violence Law

Prior to the enactment of the Anti Gang Violence Act in 2010 (Act), criminal offences committed by a group or a gang were not recognised as a distinct category of criminal offences. Section 1 of the Act specifically criminalises and sets out specific penalties for the creation, operation and the carrying out of criminal offences by a group or a gang of individuals. Section 23 of this Act defines a gang as “any group or team created with a primary objective of conducting a criminal activity.”<sup>11</sup> This study has demonstrated that youth make the choice of joining a group or a gang for a number of reasons that may or may not include the intention to carry out criminal acts. In a situation where an individual commits a criminal offence, however minor, he is faced with the dilemma of not only being penalised for the commission of the offence but also for his affiliations with a group or gang that may have no connection with the offence that has been committed. Instead of supporting an individual to rehabilitate and become a contributing member of the society, the law further marginalises and pushes such individuals into a life of crime.

## 10. Role of Religious Leaders

There is no evidence to suggest that gangs receive funding from religious groups and there appears to be little interaction between religious leaders and gangs. In fact, almost all gangs show scepticism towards the ability of religious leaders to have a positive impact on preventing gang violence in the current generation; only members in two of the 20 gangs which participated were

*“We have lost respect for them (religious leaders)... their thinking is obsolete... some are even seen in videos indulging in activities prohibited in religion and the next day they are preaching... they do not act what they preach.”*

***Gang Member***

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<sup>11</sup> Section 23, Anti Gang Violence Act 2010, Act No. 18/2010.

hopeful that religious leaders could play a positive role. There is significant distrust toward religious leaders due to their perceived involvement in politics. Gang members perceive this as selling out to corruption.

Gang members argue that people involved in violence may know about religion and the difference between right and wrong but they choose to ignore it; thus implying that religious education as they receive it is insufficient to deter them from violence.

Two gangs point out that if religious education was to reach very young age groups, such as primary school, then it may have an influence on spreading peaceful values in the community and curtailing gang violence. They also suggest that if all the religious leaders were to say the same thing they might be heard. At the moment different religious leaders preach conflicting information on the same religious issues.

## **11. Recommendations <sup>12</sup>**

### **Police**

- Ensure police do not record criminal complaints for minor and traffic related offences;
- Community-based policing that establishes productive dialogue and collaboration between gang members, the police and the community with the view to increasing community security.

### **Prison and Judiciary**

- Prisons program that aims to better prepare inmates for re-entering society and that prevents recruitment into gangs while in prison.
- Harsher punishments for those who recruit under aged children to gangs and engage them in committing criminal acts.

### **Education**

- School based religious values education with a particular focus on non-violence and dealing with the problem of bullying.
- Dealing with bullying by incorporating techniques to manage bullies into teacher training program.

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<sup>12</sup>All gang members say that they are not aware of nongovernmental organizations or government offering an effective program related to reducing gang violence. They claim that in cases where there are youth centers these are often dominated by one gang. Some gang members mentioned the “Hunaru” government program for youth but claimed that it was ineffective. The Asia Foundation could investigate this and look at what worked and what did not work under this program.

## **Youth**

- Generate self-employment opportunities for youth.
- Increase vocational training opportunities in prisons and during re-integration.
- Empower youth groups to generate legitimate self-employment opportunities through increased vocational education programs. Including specifically targeting the so called ‘lost age group’—16 to 18 year olds.

## **Drug Rehabilitation**

- Increase the number of drug rehabilitation counselors and improve their awareness of gangs and sensitivity to gang culture.
- Introduce prison based drug rehabilitation program for offenders.

## **Family Services**

- Improve family counselling services to deal with various issues that affect families, such as divorce and the death of family members.

## **Conclusion**

This research demonstrates that gang violence in the Maldives is a serious and complex problem that cannot be delinked from broader issues related to democratic governance and social welfare. Many gang members are driven to join gangs by breakdowns in family structures and a desire to belong to a group for the sake of support and protection. The desire for social mobilisation and to attain the fruits of economic development is also a motivating factor for gang involvement. Many young Maldivians are seeking to fulfil their desire for higher incomes, higher status, and affluent lifestyle by engaging in gang activities. Problems of unemployment, community issues, bullying at school and drug abuse can generate youths who are at risk of being recruited into or joining gangs voluntarily.

Criminal records, societal labelling and stigmatization do not aid members even when they do seek to improve their lives and keep away from gang violence. If they have a police record they face a series of obstacles when seeking to reintegrate into ‘normal’ society. Furthermore, inadequate drug rehabilitation services and a lack of gang prevention programs in prisons encourage involvement in gang activities when inmates are released.

Political and business elites exploit gangs to carry out a range of illegal activities that serve their political or business interests in exchange for financing the gangs. This has worrying implications for support for democracy among the young generation as they witness first hand corruption on the part of their political representatives.

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## ANNEXES

### Annex I – Background of Focus Group Discussion Participants

#### a) Socio-demographic Background

Table 1 below provides information on the age, marital status and educational background of the FGD participants.

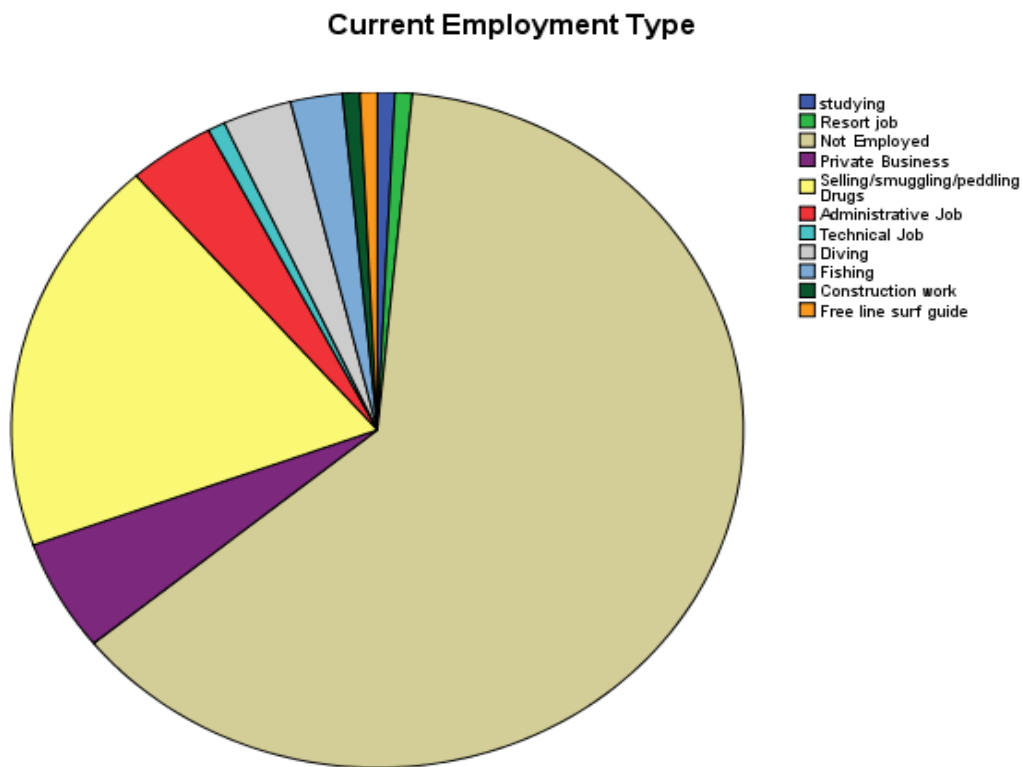
Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics

Age	Mean age (n=131)	25 years
	Age Range	11 to 70 years
Marital Status	Married	(n=25) 19.1%
	Single	(n=89) 67.9%
	Divorced	(n=13) 9.9%
	Widowed	(n=4) 3.1 %
Educational Status	Just literate	(n=12) 9.2 %
	Grade 8 and above	(n=39) 29.8 %
	Completed O/Level	(n=48) 36.6 %
	Completed A/Level	(n=10) 7.6 %
	Degree and Above	(n=11) 8.4%
	Others	(n=11) 8.4 %



**b) Employment Status of the FGD Participants**

Graph 1: Current Employment Type

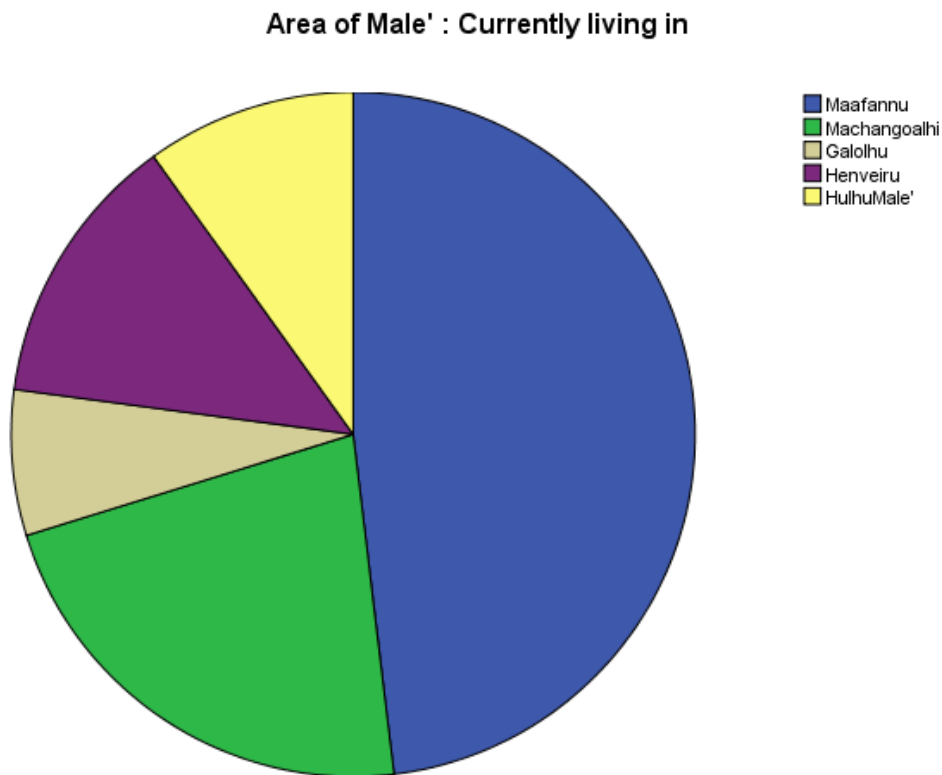


**Table 2: Causes of Unemployment**

<i>Causes of Unemployment</i>	<i>(n) %</i>
Existence of current police records	(n=67) 51.1%
Unavailability of jobs with desired salary level	(n=50) 38.2 %
Not interested in finding employment	(n=7) 5.3%
Studying	(n=4) 3.1 %
Is underage for employment	(n=1) .8%
Others	(n=2) 1.5%

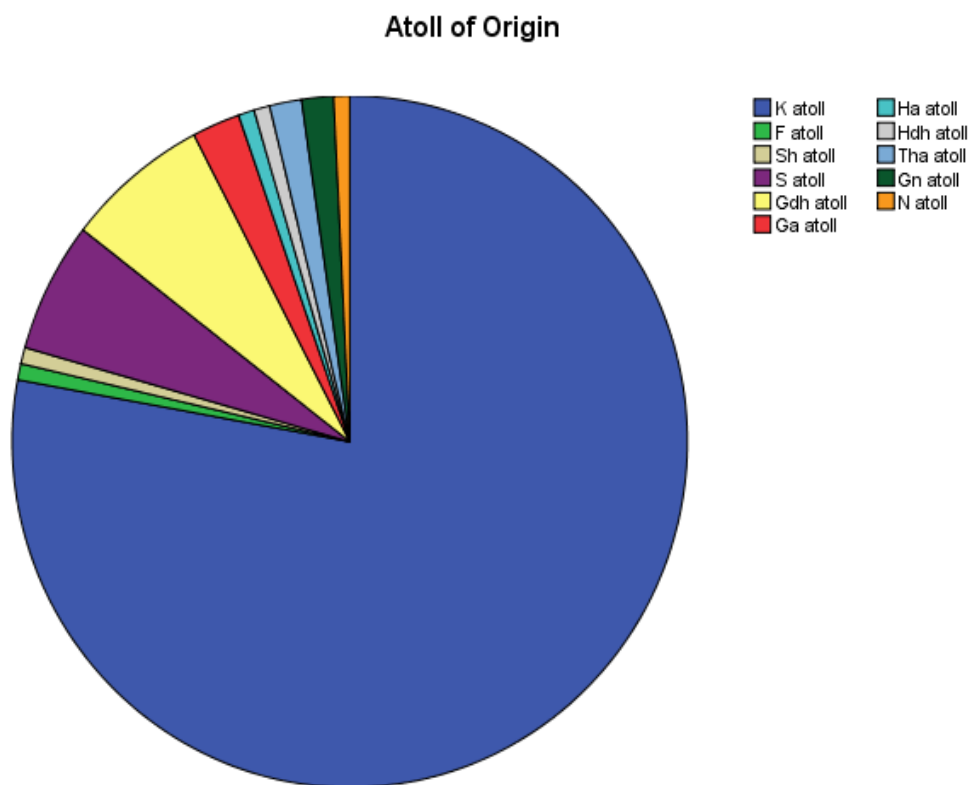
**c) Current Residence of FGD Participants**

Graph 2: Location of Current Residence



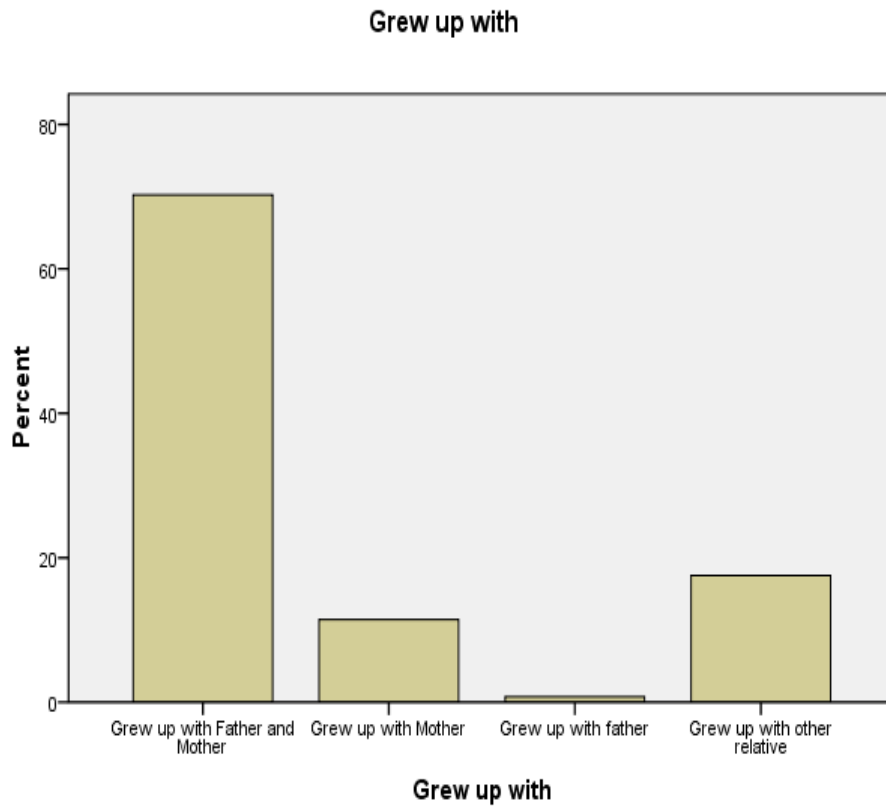
A majority of the FGD participants are permanent residents of Male' (n=102, 77.9%) while a minority belongs to other atolls (n=29, 22.1%)

Graph 3: Atolls of Origin

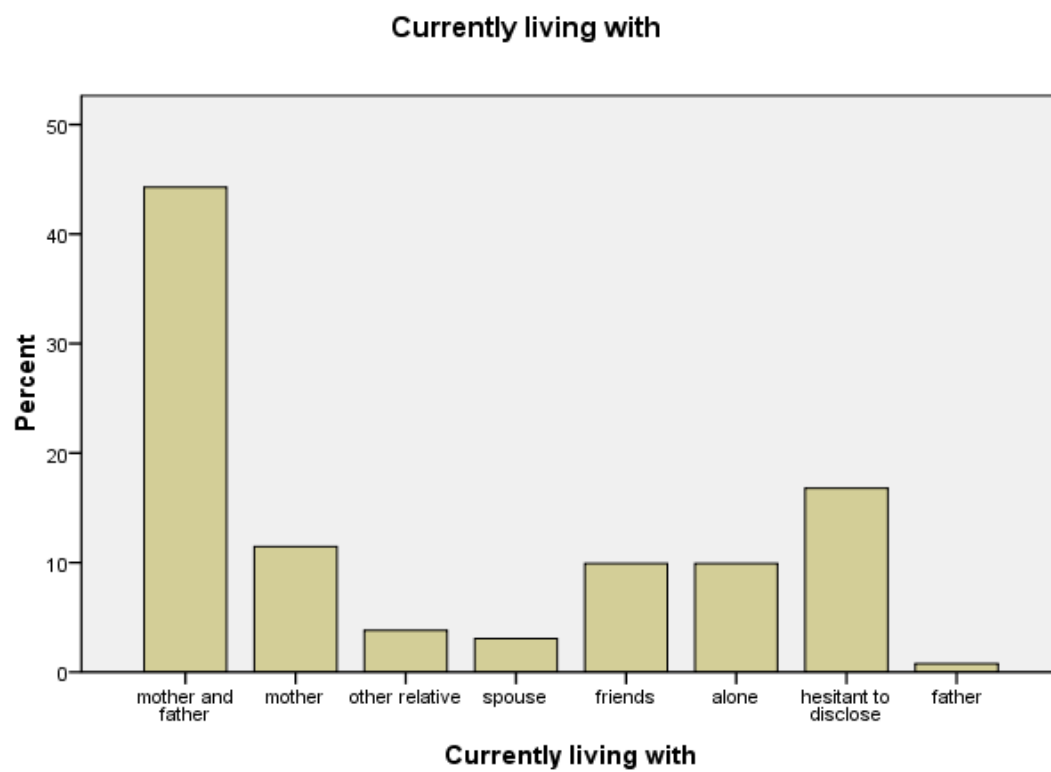


### a) Family Background of the FGD Participants

Graph 4: Grew Up with Parent

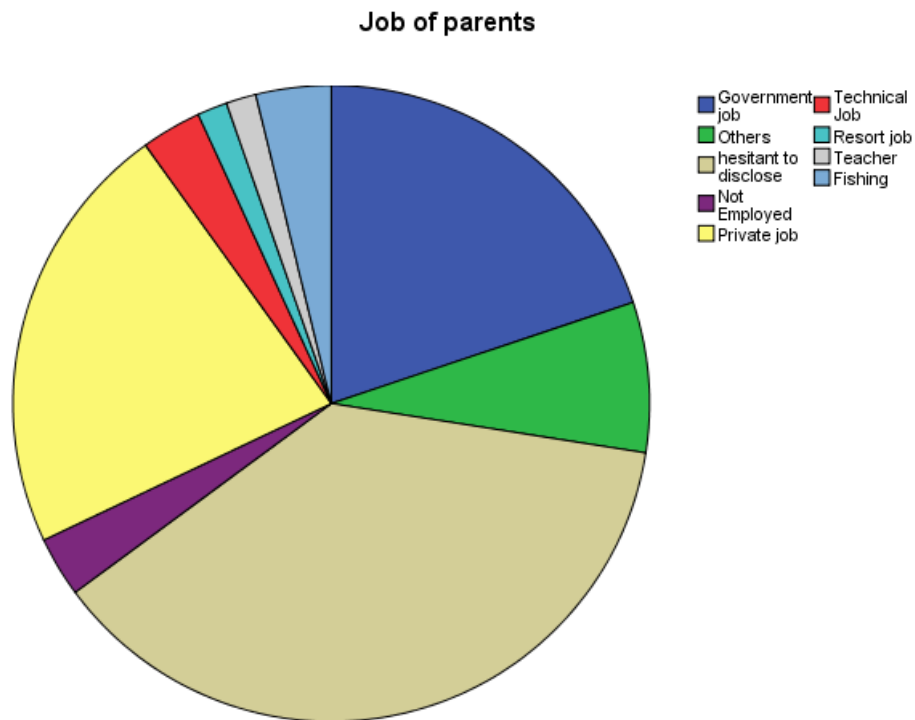


Graph 5: Currently living with



A majority of the participants were hesitant to disclose the type of employment their parents are engaged in due to a fear of being identified. Among those who disclosed this information, however, it appears that a majority of parents are either in government employment or in private business.

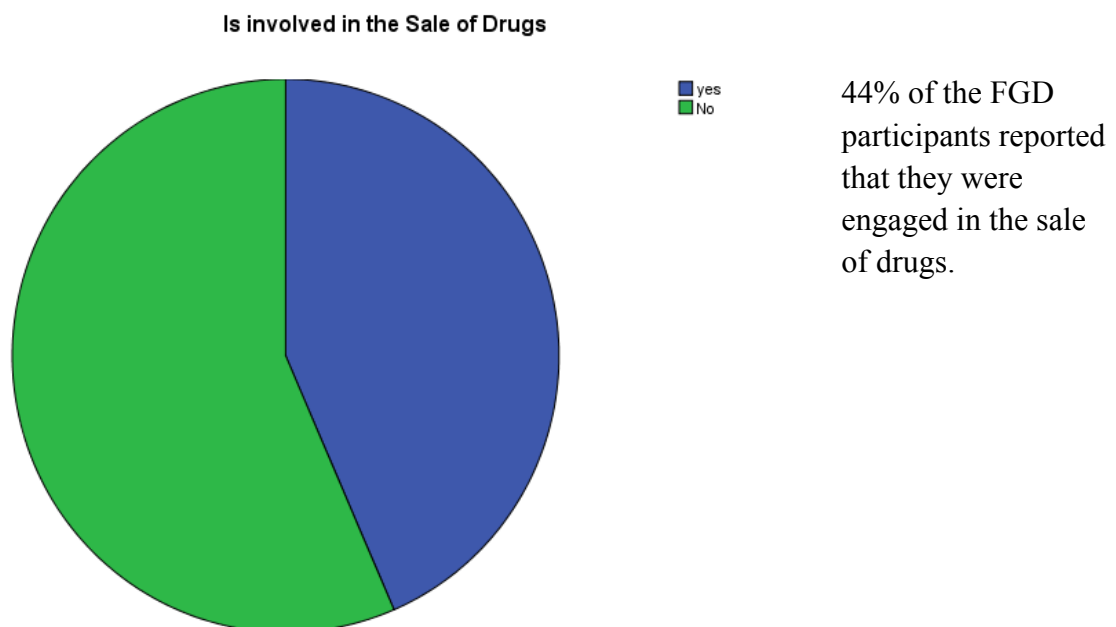
Graph 6: Family Background: Job of parents



**e) Drug Use and Sale among FGD Participants**

54.2% (n=71) of the FGD participants reported they were currently using drugs.

Graph 7: Involvement in the Sale of Drugs



## Annex II – Additional Recommendations

### Recommendations and Needs as Stated by Respondents

The following is a list of recommendations as outlined directly by gang members, followed by recommendations for future programming to curtail gang violence in the Maldives:

- Need to teach kids that life should be valued, this should be done when children are still at school.
- There needs to be educational programs for people in jail on how to deal with family, friends and society when they are released from jail.
- Need to increase job opportunities or projects that youth can work in to earn a legitimate income.
- Youth without mainstream employment need to be kept occupied in jobs such as garage work or small businesses.
- Need drug rehabilitation counsellors with adequate training and experience.
- Once people are released from jail they need a community re integration program.
- There needs to be entertainment/youth centres in every ward of Male' where young people can hang out rather than going to hang out with the gangs.
- There should be sports activities where youth can participate for free.
- Need to conduct community awareness programs relating to gang violence amongst various community groups.
- Police and gang members should talk to each other and address gang violence as a team.
- Do something about the police record.
- Need judges to be fair when sentencing.
- Need to have a look at creating a law regarding self-defence.
- Media should stop labelling innocent people.
- Need programs to create awareness and address bullying in schools.
- Some gang members need help to become divers; assistance can be provided as course fees for further studies.
- Need religious leaders to convey the same message, such as rulings from a Fiqh academy statement on issues that may generate conflicting view points.
- Needs Islamic Shari'ah now to stop the violence (this was not a widely held view, only one member made this suggestion).

## Additional Recommendations for Programming

- Youth political/voter education program to teach young people on how they can positively be involved in democracy.
- Programming around advocacy for government provision of drug rehabilitation and counselling services.
- Programming around advocacy for government provision of youth services, including youth community centres.
- Community awareness programs for the public on how labelling and discrimination affect youth and their involvement in gangs.
- To consider programs targeted at parents so that they can recognize problems with their children and instruct them on the dangers of being involved in gangs.
- To conduct a thorough national gang violence study.

## Annex III – Description of Relevant Theories of Gang Development

Various social theories can help to explain why young people get involved in gangs. The *Social Learning Theory* (Williams & McShane, 1999), for example, suggests that human behaviour is learnt through reinforcement and punishments. Thus, if a criminal act or an illegal behaviour is reinforced by providing a reward, youth will resort to crime. Furthermore, *Social Development Theory* (Hawkins, 1998) highlights the importance of forming bonds; this includes the bond formed with family, peers and colleagues. According to this theory youth are aware that they will get the loyalty and support from groups with which they have formed a strong bond, thus joining gangs is one way of forming bonds for the social support that it provides. Similarly, according to the *Social Disorganization Theory* (Spergel, 1995) a lack of social connectedness results in youth joining gangs and gangs provide the satisfaction that society failed to provide them.

Other theories explain involvement in gangs as a means to improve socio-economic standing in society. According to the *Subculture Theory* (Cohen, 1995; Williams & McShane, 1999) youth from lower classes join gangs for the purposes of social mobilisation. The theory goes that they are constrained to lower classes; but by joining a gang and engaging in criminal activity they form their own identity and shape their lives. Similarly, the *Strain Theory* (Goldstein, 1991) explains that youth often desire a rich lifestyle and when they are unable to see possibilities to achieve wealth legally, they then join gangs.

According to the *Differential Association Theory* (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978) criminal behaviour is learned from belonging to certain social groups, while the *Underclass Theory* (Cohen, 1969; Wilson, 1991) states that having a poor education and being under qualified results in youth having few opportunities, thus they join gangs.

A further useful theory is The *Labelling Theory* (Williams & McShane, 1999), which proposes that youth join gangs and become criminals due to the actions of a majority of members in society; the society first labels youth as gangster, then they internalize this identity and become criminals. Most of the above theories are based on research done with European, American and South African samples.