



Clan Affiliation and Its Influence on Youth Involvement in Criminal Organizations and Gangs in Israel

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Abstract

This study investigates how clan (*hamula*) and family affiliation influence youth involvement in gangs and organized crime within Arab communities in Israel. The research examines two groups. Group 1 comprises youth who are actively or were formerly involved in organized crime, while Group 2 consists of non-involved youth from the same communities who observe peers engaged in criminal activity. The findings reveal the dual role of clan affiliation. It can serve as a risk factor when clan loyalty, honor codes and collective identity pressure youth into gang activity; the clan structure may facilitate recruitment through kinship ties and perceived obligations to extended family members to engage in illicit activities. Conversely, clan affiliation can function as a protective mechanism when cultural values are redirected towards prosocial outcomes and individual agency is affirmed. Non-involved youth identify supportive clan intervention and positive family influence as key protective factors enabling desistance and integration into conventional society. Understanding this double-edged dynamic from both involved and non-involved youth perspectives is essential for developing culturally sensitive intervention strategies.

Keywords: Youth; clan affiliation; gang involvement; organized crime; criminal identity.

Introduction

Youth involvement in organized crime and gang activity presents a critical challenge to law enforcement, social welfare systems and community structures worldwide (Decker et al., 2022; Densley & Pyrooz, 2019; Densley et al., 2020; Mora, 2020; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2015). While conventional criminological research emphasizes universal risk and protective factors – such as socioeconomic disadvantage, family dysfunction and peer influence – a comprehensive understanding of youth pathways into crime requires attention to the unique cultural and community structures that shape these trajectories (Brotherton, 2025; Guerra, 2022; Sleight & Heeks, 2023). This is particularly evident in Arab society in Israel, where clan-based conflicts (*hamula* disputes), organized crime and gang activities account for more than half of all homicide cases (Abu-Nimer, 2025; Siegel, 2023).

For conceptual clarity, a gang is defined here as a relatively durable, street-oriented youth group whose collective identity includes involvement in illegal activity (Decker et al., 2022). Organized crime, by contrast, refers to more structured and sustained criminal activity conducted by individuals or groups acting collaboratively to obtain financial or material benefit through serious criminal offences (Amir, 1998). Although the two phenomena may overlap – for example, when gangs



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participate in organized criminal markets – they are conceptually distinct in terms of their organization, continuity and primary objectives.

Arab citizens of Israel constitute approximately two million individuals – roughly 20% of the total population (Ben-Porat et al., 2022), yet account for 50% of the criminal prison population and 94% of those involved in firearm-related offences, while only 4% are subject to criminal investigations (Abu-Nimer, 2025). This low investigation rate undermines deterrence and erodes public trust, compelling victims' families to seek justice through extralegal means including clan-based retaliation (Ben-Porat, 2020). Arab individuals represent 40% of those involved in extortion cases, and the homicide rate among Arabs stands at 9.76 per 100,000, compared with 0.5 per 100,000 among Jewish Israelis (Ben-Porat, 2020; Hasisi et al., 2020). Approximately 57,000 Arab youth aged 18–24 years operate outside any educational or vocational framework, with significant numbers involved in criminal activity (Abu-Nimer, 2025; State Comptroller of Israel, 2023; Weinreb, 2021). The October 2023 war further strained law-enforcement capacity, creating an enforcement vacuum that criminal organizations have reportedly exploited (INSS, 2023).

Within this context, a new generation of young Arabs, who are facing economic challenges and social barriers while navigating between traditional clan loyalty and individual aspirations, is progressively filling the leadership vacuum once occupied by traditional hamula authority structures (Ben-Porat & Mizrahi, 2021; Hasisi et al., 2020; Siegel, 2023). This study addresses a critical gap by centering the voices and lived experiences of Arab youth themselves, examining how clan and family affiliation shapes their pathways into, or away from, criminal involvement, and how individual perceptions of identity and agency influence criminal identity formation (Melde & Esbensen, 2014; Welsh et al., 2024).

The Research Gap

Israeli criminological research remains limited in its capacity to explain how specific cultural institutions influence gang recruitment and youth criminal involvement (Badarna & Gesser-Edelsburg, 2024). Current approaches highlight how economic challenges, cultural identity and social exclusion intersect (Berger et al., 2023; Bishop et al., 2024; Mendez & Kerig, 2023), but Israeli scholarship has given limited attention to how these dynamics manifest within Arab communities (Katz, 2002). Particularly lacking is qualitative, interpretivist research that centers Arab youth perspectives: how they perceive the tension between loyalty to traditional clan structures and aspirations for social mobility; how they experience the relationship between hamula authority and state police authority; and the extent to which these perceptions influence their decisions to engage with or resist criminal organizations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2014). While existing research focuses primarily on socioeconomic risk factors such as unemployment, school dropout rates and geographic concentration of violence, the specific role of hamula and clan affiliation in shaping youth criminal trajectories has received limited systematic attention; this is the gap the present study seeks to address (Higginson et al., 2018).

Cultural Structure: Between Tradition and Modernity

Arab society in Israel is characterized by traditional patriarchal family structures that emphasize collective welfare through extended kinship networks and family authority over personal matters (Dayan et al., 2026; Pely, 2016). In recent decades, the Arab community has undergone significant modernization, precipitating a shift towards more individualistic Western lifestyles, a strengthening of nuclear family units and a corresponding weakening of extended family authority (Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2023; Zemel & Rozmann, 2025). Nevertheless, contemporary Arab nuclear families exhibit hybrid characteristics, retaining both modern and traditional elements, with traditional structures often remaining dominant (Lundberg, 2021).

Importantly, Arab society in Israel should not be regarded as a homogeneous social group. Patterns of modernization, social mobility, family organization and adherence to traditional structures vary across communities and social contexts (Dayan et al., 2026). Differences in religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, geographic location and type of locality – particularly between rural, urban and mixed-city settings – may shape access to economic and educational opportunities, as well as influence the strength of traditional family and community structures (Kaufman et al. 2012; Pely, 2016). Consequently, the transition from collective and kinship-based social organization toward more individualized patterns has not occurred uniformly across Arab society (Katz, 2002). This internal heterogeneity is particularly relevant when considering the role of the hamula, whose social authority and influence may vary according to the local and socioeconomic context in which young people live (Khalaila et al. 2025; Khalaily & Navot, 2019).

The Hamula Structure: Protection or Risk?

The term “hamula” refers to an extended kinship group or clan comprising multiple related family units, traditionally connected through patrilineal ties (Khalaily & Navot, 2019). Unlike the nuclear family, the hamula represents a broader kinship network in which members share a collective family identity and may be bound by expectations of mutual responsibility, loyalty and support (Kaufman et al., 2012; Khalaily & Navot, 2019). Within Arab society in Israel, the hamula has also traditionally functioned as an informal authority structure, governed by family loyalty and unwritten behavioral codes (Mondey & Beeri, 2024). Historically, it served as a source of social protection, conflict-resolution through traditional mechanisms (*sulha*) and economic support (Khalaily & Navot, 2019).

In the contemporary era, however, the role of the hamula has become increasingly ambivalent, representing a political and economic entity in which social cohesion has been supplanted by new forms of control and leadership (Mondey & Beeri, 2024; Spapens & Moors, 2020). Recent research demonstrates that escalating homicides within Arab society result significantly from increased criminal activity by hamulas (Siegel, 2023), organized crime and gangs (Abu-Nimer, 2025; Hasisi et al., 2020; Khoury-Kassabri, 2019; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2023). In the southern Negev region, conflicts emerge primarily between rival *hamulas* rather than through dominant Arab crime organizations (Ynetnews, 2025).

The hamula thus functions paradoxically: strong kinship ties and clan elder involvement may prevent youth from drifting into criminal activity (Bacchini et al., 2020), yet where entire kinship networks are involved in criminal enterprise, family loyalty may obligate youth participation in illegal activities and inter-clan conflict may pressure youth towards violence and blood revenge (Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2015; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2023; Siegel, 2023).

Youth Recruitment Factors

Organized crime syndicates increasingly recruit young “soldiers” raised in poverty within marginalized Arab towns, who observe senior crime figures displaying wealth through luxury vehicles and lavish residences (Ynetnews, 2025). Criminal careers offer adolescents aged 16–18 years rapid financial pathways in communities where legitimate employment and credit are severely constrained. Recent years have also seen increased dropout rates from educational and employment frameworks among Arab youth (Haneen et al., 2025), with some engaging in substance abuse and antisocial behaviors, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation by criminal organizations (Hasisi et al., 2020; INSS, 2023).

Youth in Arab communities are also strongly influenced by masculine honor culture codes (Bhatia et al., 2024; Jaraba, 2023), which prescribe the protection of friends and family, even when such protection requires involvement in violence (Spapens & Moors, 2020). Gangs frequently provide contexts for demonstrating masculine identity and honor – a cultural dynamic that reinforces their recruitment appeal.

Method

To explore clan affiliation and its impact on gang involvement and criminal identity processes among Arab youth, we employed a qualitative interpretive-constructivist strategy (Burns et al., 2021; Pilarska, 2021). Constructivism assumes that individuals construct meaning through lived experience and interaction, allowing researchers to capture subjective interpretations and incorporate unexpected content emerging from the field (Allen, 2020).

Research Population

This study was conducted in Israel between 2024 and 2025 and comprised 25 male participants aged 16–24 years from Arab communities. The study focused exclusively on male participants because the research population of interest – youth directly involved in gangs and organized crime in the communities studied – is predominantly male (Miller & Brunson, 2000). Accordingly, the sampling strategy was designed to capture the experiences of young men who were directly involved in, had disengaged from or were exposed to peers involved in these criminal networks. The exclusion of female participants was therefore related to the specific focus and sampling framework of the present study, rather than an assumption that women are unaffected by organized crime and community violence. The experiences of young Arab women may differ substantially and warrant separate investigation.

Geographically, the sample was drawn from Arab communities located in the north and center of Israel. These regions should not be understood as culturally homogeneous or as representing a simple traditional–modern divide. Rather, Arab communities in both regions reflect varying combinations of traditional kinship-based organization and processes of modernization,

including urbanization, educational mobility and the strengthening of nuclear family and individual orientations (Katz, 2002; Kaufman et al. 2012). Accordingly, the social authority of the hamula may differ across localities and socioeconomic contexts. This regional heterogeneity is relevant to the present study because the capacity of the hamula to function as a source of protection, social control or criminal obligation may depend partly on the local cultural and social environment.

The sample was recruited from two distinct groups. Group 1 consisted of 12 gang-involved youth – young men actively or formerly involved in organized crime. Of these, six were former gang members who, according to Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Social Affairs records, had left gang membership and had not committed crimes for two or more years prior to the study, while six were active gang members under probation officer supervision or house arrest during the study period. All Group 1 participants were single and had extensive records with juvenile justice authorities, with criminal activities primarily involving property crimes (76%), drug offences (68%) and violent crimes (52%); active members had accumulated more convictions on average than former members.

Group 2 consisted of 13 non-involved youth from the same Arab communities who had no criminal record, no current or past gang affiliation, resided in communities where organized crime was present and had peers or acquaintances involved in criminal activities. This group was included to examine how non-involved youth perceive the influence of family and clan (hamula) affiliation on their peers' pathways into crime.

Research Tools

The study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Tavory, 2020) conducted in a conversational format, encouraging participants to share personal narratives (Burns et al., 2022; Kvale, 1996). For Group 1, interview topics included significant life events, relationships with gang members and family or clan networks, attitudes toward gang involvement and antisocial behavior, criminal identity-formation and the role of clan and family affiliation in criminal trajectories. Representative questions included:

- Did any relatives introduce you, vouch for you or pave the way into the criminal group?
- Does clan affiliation shape hierarchy, roles or trust within the gang itself?
- Did your clan give you protection or leverage in conflicts within the group – for example, over rivals, money or territory?

For Group 2, interview topics focused on perceptions of peers engaged in organized crime, the influence of clan and family structures on criminal involvement, protective factors within those structures, views on honor codes and kinship obligations and how non-involved youth distinguish their own life choices from those of criminally involved peers. A representative question included:

- Are certain clans seen as more tied to organized crime and does that affect how their youth are treated?

Both groups were also asked a shared closing question addressing the study's core theoretical concern:

- Is clan affiliation a direct path into crime, or just one factor among others, like poverty or lack of opportunity?

Research Procedure

Group 1 participants were recruited via snowball sampling, whereby gang-involved youth engaged in organized crime were reached through personal acquaintances and referrals, with each participant introducing further individuals from their social networks to take part in the study. Additional participants were recruited through the Adult Probation Services Division of the Israel Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services and through rehabilitative homes for at-risk adolescents.

Group 2 participants were recruited through community centers in Arab localities, educational institutions and via snowball sampling through trusted community contacts. All participants signed an informed consent form, and the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Western Galilee Academic College. Participants under the age of 18 provided written assent alongside informed consent signed by a parent or legal guardian. Over six months, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted across the two groups, each lasting approximately one hour. Interviews took place in private settings chosen by participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality: 13 interviews were conducted in rehabilitative homes or other private facilities and 12 were conducted in cafés or community locations near participants' residences or workplaces. All interviews were conducted in Arabic or Hebrew, based on participant preference, and subsequently transcribed (Edwards & Holland, 2020). The interview protocol moved from general opening questions to focused queries addressing core research themes, with

a particular emphasis on understanding how family and clan (hamula) affiliation shapes criminal involvement or resistance to it within Arab communities in Israel. Quotations presented in this article were translated into English by a bilingual member of the research team and subsequently reviewed through a back-translation procedure to verify accuracy of meaning and tone.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed established qualitative protocols (Braun & Clarke, 2022) in three stages: immersion through repeated reading to identify preliminary patterns; systematic coding using inductive and deductive approaches by two independent coders; and thematic development through constant comparative analysis. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion until agreement was reached. This process yielded six major thematic findings. To enhance validity and credibility, three strategies were implemented: peer validation by two external readers; participant validation by five participants who confirmed interpretive accuracy (Creswell, 2013); and thick description through anonymized contextual detail and pseudonyms (Allen, 2020). Limitations include the exclusively male sample, retrospective recall bias, and the cross-sectional design.

Ethics

Research with gang-involved youth raises ethical challenges, including risks of self-incrimination, stigma and emotional distress. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the Western Galilee Academic College. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. For participants under the age of 18, the ethics committee approved a waiver of parental/guardian consent, given the minimal-risk nature of the study and the potential harm and impracticality of requiring parental involvement in this context. Participants under 18 provided informed assent in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines for research involving minors. Confidentiality protocols included the use of pseudonyms, secure encrypted storage of recordings and transcripts, and removal of identifying information. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw at any time. Researchers were trained to recognize signs of emotional discomfort, and protocols were established for disclosures of imminent harm.

Findings

Analysis revealed six major themes illuminating how clan affiliation, cultural values, socioeconomic conditions and institutional trust shape Arab youth pathways into or away from criminal involvement. The broader generational discourse among Arab youth – as reflected in community debates, activist spaces and social media – provides an important complementary layer throughout: younger voices foreground economic exclusion and institutional failure while engaging more critically with traditional frameworks such as the sulha or clan authority.

Violence, Homicide and Illegal Weapons

Both groups spoke candidly about the daily reality of lethal violence – rising homicide rates, the normalization of armed conflict and the alarming prevalence of illegal firearms. For many participants, murder was not an abstract statistic, but a lived experience involving neighbors, classmates and relatives.

Group 1 participants described weapons and violence as an unremarkable feature of daily life:

There are more guns in our village than in some armies. Everyone has something. You don't even think about it anymore – it's just how things are. (Male, 20, active gang member)

I've been to four funerals in the last year. All guys I knew. All from violence. And nobody gets arrested, nobody goes to prison. It just continues. (Male, 22, former gang member)

You carry a weapon because you're afraid. And then the other side carries one because they're afraid of you. And then someone dies. It never ends. (Male, 21, active gang member)

Group 2 participants described the violence as a constant source of fear and grief – and, paradoxically, as a powerful deterrent shaping their own decisions:

I lost two friends to shootings before I was 18. It's part of why I made the choices I made. (Male, 19, non-involved)
Seeing what happened to guys I grew up with – that was my intervention program. No school, no social worker taught me what those funerals taught me. (Male, 19, non-involved)

When your friends start dying, you either go deeper in or you get out completely. There's no middle anymore. (Male, 24, non-involved)

Participants across both groups identified the widespread circulation of illegal firearms from conflict zones and military stockpiles as a structural accelerant of violence. The low criminal investigation rate means perpetrators operate with effective impunity, and cycles of revenge killing and inter-clan retaliation continue largely uninterrupted. The normalization of violence thus functions both as a consequence of institutional neglect and an independent driver of criminal involvement.

Alienation and Discrimination as Drivers of Criminal Involvement

A recurring theme was deep institutional distrust and the pervasive feeling of structural disadvantage – conditions functioning as fertile ground for disengagement from the law and movement towards criminal pathways. Participants described experiencing discrimination not as an occasional occurrence, but as a defining structural feature of life as a minority in Israel.

Group 1 participants frequently connected their entry into criminal life with a felt sense of exclusion:

I looked around and saw that no matter what I did – school, work – I was always going to be the Arab kid who doesn't belong. At least in the organization, I belonged to something. (Male, 21, active gang member)

The state doesn't invest in us. The banks don't give us loans. There are no jobs. What exactly are they offering us instead of the street? (Male, 18, active gang member)

You feel like a ghost in your own country. Nobody sees you unless you're a problem. So I became a problem. (Male, 20, former gang member)

Group 2 participants acknowledged the same structural realities while describing their efforts to resist the pull toward crime:

I feel the discrimination every day. But I decided that I'm not going to let them make me into what they already think I am. (Male, 22, non-involved)

We grow up feeling like second-class citizens. That anger is real. The question is what you do with it. (Male, 24, non-involved)

A generationally distinctive feature is apparent: while older cohorts interpreted deprivation primarily through a national-political lens, younger voices increasingly framed these experiences in socioeconomic and psychological terms – from collective political grievance to individual and structural exclusion. This reframing opens space for concrete policy demands, while potentially obscuring deeper structural roots.

Policing Challenges

All participants acknowledged the profound difficulty of policing in Arab communities, given pervasive institutional distrust and non-cooperation, yet both groups expressed awareness that criminal organizations filling the governance vacuum were deeply harmful to their communities.

Group 1 participants combined hostility towards law enforcement with recognition that its absence enabled the violence around them:

I hate the police. But I also watched three of my friends die in the last two years and nobody was arrested. So what does that tell you? (Male, 22, former gang member)

The police aren't here for us. But without them, the criminals run everything. We're stuck in the middle. (Male, 21, active gang member)

Group 2 participants were more likely to call explicitly for reform and community-based solutions: If the police came into our neighborhoods differently – with respect, with real intent to help – maybe things would change. But they have to earn that trust. (Male, 21, non-involved)

Police alone can't fix this. But neither can the community alone. There needs to be real partnership – and that means the state has to stop treating us like suspects first. (Male, 22, non-involved)

The findings across both groups point towards the need for community-oriented policing approaches grounded in procedural justice, alongside investment in educational, vocational and economic infrastructure that can offer Arab youth credible legitimate alternatives to criminal pathways.

The Need for Power and Honour

Participants across both groups emphasized Arab youth's profound need for belonging, social recognition and *karama* (honor and dignity). Criminal organizations and gangs fulfil precisely these needs, providing social identity, a sense of power and the respect of the surrounding community.

Group 1 participants described the gang as a substitute family and source of identity:

The gang becomes your home. You feel respected, you feel strong. Nobody messes with you. (Male, 21, active gang member)

My family had nothing. The organization gave me a car, money, status. For the first time, I felt like someone. (Male, 17, active gang member)

Group 2 participants recognized this dynamic in their peers while having found alternative sources of belonging: I see why guys join. You want to feel like you're somebody. The gang gives that – until it takes everything away from you. (Male, 21, non-involved)

My family gave me that sense of belonging. My father told me: your honor comes from how you build your life, not from who fears you. (Male, 19, non-involved)

These findings highlight the centrality of identity and belonging as motivational drivers, and point to the family and clan as potential counterweights – when those structures function positively.

Economic Factors as Pathways to Crime

Participants consistently highlighted economic marginalization and structural discrimination as converging forces increasing vulnerability to criminal recruitment. Young Arabs aged 16–18 years are particularly attracted to criminal careers because they offer rapid financial return in communities where legitimate credit, employment and economic mobility are severely constrained. Israeli banks frequently deny loans to residents without building permits – a chronic problem in Arab communities where informal construction is widespread:

In six months with the organization I made more money than my father made in five years. Tell me how that's supposed to not be tempting. (Male, 18, active gang member)

There are no jobs for us in the villages. The ones who have money – they got it from the street. Everyone can see that. (Male, 20, active gang member)

If there were real opportunities – jobs, loans, futures – fewer guys would go to the gangs. It's not that they love crime. It's that there's nothing else on the table. (Male, 20, non-involved)

Participants across both groups described criminal involvement as economically attractive in contexts where legitimate employment, credit and opportunities for upward mobility were perceived as limited. Group 1 participants emphasized the immediate financial rewards associated with criminal organizations, whereas Group 2 participants similarly recognized the economic appeal of crime, but viewed expanded employment, credit and vocational opportunities as important alternatives. Across the accounts, participants therefore framed economic marginalization not only as a source of vulnerability to criminal recruitment, but also as an area in which structural intervention could reduce that vulnerability.

The Influence of Family, Clan and Hamula: Protection and Risk

Both groups articulated the dual role of the family and hamula as simultaneously protective and risk-generating. Where the clan functioned as a source of guidance, supervision and positive cultural values, it buffered youth against criminal involvement. Where it was enmeshed in criminal enterprise or rigid honor codes obligating violence, it became a direct pathway into crime. Group 1 participants described how clan ties drew them towards – or trapped them within – criminal worlds:

My uncle was in the organization. My cousins were in the organization. By the time I was sixteen, it felt like it was already decided for me. (Male, 19, active gang member)

The hamula protects you, but it also owns you. When they needed me to do something, I couldn't say no. That's not how it works. (Male, 22, former gang member)

Group 2 participants described the hamula as a protective force when its values were oriented towards education and legitimate success:

My grandfather sat me down when I was 13 and told me: the honor of this family comes from education and hard work, not from the street. I never forgot that. (Male, 19, non-involved)

My hamula is strict – but in a good way. If I had done something wrong, I would have had 30 uncles on my doorstep. That kept me straight. (Male, 24, non-involved)

These contrasting accounts underscore the finding that clan affiliation is not inherently criminogenic or protective; rather, its effect depends critically on the values, orientation and criminal involvement of the kinship network itself. Notably, many younger participants articulate a more ambivalent and sometimes openly critical relationship with the hamula, questioning the scope of its authority – particularly when clan loyalty is invoked to compel participation in violence.

Discussion

The present study examined the pathways of Arab youth in Israel into and away from organized crime through the lived experiences of gang members, former gang members and non-involved youth. The findings reveal a complex interplay of structural, institutional, cultural and psychological forces that cannot be reduced to any single causal factor. This discussion situates the findings within the broader criminological literature, with particular attention to social disorganization theory, strain theory and procedural justice theory.

Structural Marginalization and the Logic of Criminal Involvement

The most consistent theme across both groups was the perception of structural exclusion – from employment, credit, education and effective state protection. This finding aligns closely with social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942), which identifies poverty, institutional weakness and community fragmentation as primary drivers of elevated crime rates. Arab communities in Israel exhibit these structural conditions: geographically concentrated disadvantage, constrained economic mobility and weak formal institutional presence.

Sampson and Groves (1989) demonstrated that social disorganization mediates structural disadvantage through the disruption of community-level social controls – supervision of youth, local friendship networks and organizational participation. The present findings suggest all three are under severe strain: participants described erosion of parental authority, absent community organizations and collapsed peer networks oriented towards legitimate achievement. The gang stepped into this vacuum, providing supervision, social bonds and alternative organizational structure.

The economic logic of criminal recruitment resonates with Merton's (1938) strain theory: criminal innovation emerges when culturally endorsed success goals are structurally blocked. Arab communities face restricted bank credit due to building permit shortages, labor market discrimination and chronically under-invested public services (Abraham Initiatives, 2023; Gharrah, 2018). Agnew's (1992) general strain theory further enriches the analysis by broadening sources of strain beyond economic deprivation to include loss, humiliation and exposure to violence, substantially lowering the perceived cost of criminal adaptation. Critically, Group 2 participants faced the same structural conditions, yet navigated away from crime, pointing to strong family bonds and clearly articulated future orientation as decisive protective factors (Hawkins et al., 2000).

Institutional Distrust, Legal Cynicism, and the Dual Legitimacy Crisis

A pervasive distrust of formal law enforcement characterized both groups, consistent with international research documenting lower institutional trust among racial and ethnic minorities in societies marked by histories of discrimination (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). In Israel specifically, Hasisi and Weitzer (2007) and Hasisi (2009) demonstrated that Arab citizens hold significantly more negative views of the police than Jewish citizens, persisting even when controlling for sociodemographic variables.

Tyler et al.'s (2015) procedural justice theory offers a powerful explanatory framework: public willingness to cooperate with legal authorities is less a function of deterrence than of perceived legitimacy. When people perceive the police as discriminatory or indifferent to their safety, they withdraw legitimacy and cooperation (Mentovich et al., 2020). The near-total absence of police cooperation described by participants, the silence at crime scenes, the normalization of handling disputes without formal institutions – these all reflect a community-wide legitimacy deficit.

The sulha system represents the community's traditional response to conflict and to gaps in formal state authority, yet the findings suggest its legitimacy is increasingly being questioned by younger participants. From their perspective, traditional authority is evaluated not simply on the basis of custom or respect for elders, but also according to its capacity to provide protection, prevent further violence and produce lasting conflict resolution. In the context of contemporary organized crime, widespread firearms and recurring inter-clan retaliation, the sulha was perceived as increasingly limited in its ability to contain violence and, in some cases, as postponing rather than resolving cycles of retaliation (Shahar, 2021). This critical stance is consistent with the broader generational shift identified in the present study, whereby younger participants increasingly distinguish between traditional authority as a source of support and protection and its exercise as a mechanism that no longer adequately responds to contemporary realities. The resulting erosion of confidence in the sulha occurs alongside profound distrust of formal law enforcement, producing a dual legitimacy crisis: neither the state system nor the traditional communal system is perceived as sufficiently effective and legitimate to provide reliable conflict resolution. In this institutional vacuum, criminal organizations may increasingly position themselves as alternative sources of authority and enforcement.

Identity, Belonging and the Gang as Substitute Institution

Group 1 participants' motivational accounts extended beyond economic logic to encompass a profound search for identity, recognition, and karama. The gang was described not merely as an economic organization but as a community providing social identity, brotherly belonging, and the experience of mattering to others. This resonates with Cohen's (1955) subcultural theory: youth denied status through legitimate channels develop alternative status hierarchies in which delinquent prowess becomes a source of social recognition.

Erikson's (1968) framework of identity development is instructive: for adolescents without access to stable employment, educational credentialing or civic participation, coherent identity-formation becomes structurally compromised. The gang offers a resolution – a clear social role, a narrative of strength and a community of recognition. This dynamic is particularly acute for Arab youth in Israel, who face the additional burden of navigating a minority identity within a society whose national symbols and collective memory do not include them (Akariya et al., 2025; Rekhess, 2007). Group 2 participants demonstrated that these needs can be met through alternative structures – particularly family and clan frameworks oriented towards education and legitimate achievement – underscoring the importance of collective efficacy (Sampson et al., 1997).

The Hamula as Dual Structure: Protection, Risk, and Generational Change

The hamula emerged as simultaneously protective and risk-generating, depending on the orientation and criminal involvement of the kinship network. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on the ambivalent role of ethnic community bonds in moderating criminal involvement (Ianni, 1974). Arab clans occupy an ambiguous institutional position: they function as informal governance structures where formal institutions are weak, provide economic networks where formal credit is restricted and maintain social order in the absence of effective policing. As Siegel (2024) documents, these same clan structures have become the organizational backbone of criminal enterprises in some communities – a transformation driven less by cultural pathology than by structural conditions that made clan organization both necessary and profitable.

A significant finding is the generational shift in how younger participants relate to hamula authority. While elder-generation accounts frame clan loyalty in terms of traditional obligation, many younger participants – particularly in Group 2 – articulated a more critical stance, distinguishing between hamula as genuine support and as a coercive mechanism for extracting loyalty. This critical discourse reflects broader processes of individualization and the partial breakdown of traditional authority structures under urbanization and increased educational attainment (Gharrah, 2018), and represents an important resource for intervention.

The Normalization of Violence and the Weapons Ecology

The findings document a troubling normalization of lethal violence. For Group 1 participants, weapon presence was described as unremarkable – as normal as any other aspect of daily life. For Group 2 participants, exposure to violence paradoxically functioned as a protective factor: the accumulated grief of losing friends to shootings served as a visceral deterrent that no formal intervention could replicate.

Exposure to community violence produces complex behavioral outcomes: for some youth, it increases the perceived need to carry weapons, increasing the probability of violent incidents (Wilkinson & Fagan, 1996); for others, it serves as a powerful negative exemplar reinforcing the decision to remain uninvolved. The saturation of Arab communities with illegal firearms – described by participants as practically unlimited in availability – represents an independent accelerant of criminal involvement that existing interventions have largely failed to address. Estimates suggest several hundred thousand illegal firearms circulate

in Arab communities in Israel (Tatour & Tatour, 2024), and the homicide investigation rate in Arab communities – approximately 15% compared with 65% in Jewish communities – creates conditions of effective impunity that further normalize violence and perpetuate retributive cycles (CNN, 2026; Hasisi & Itskovich, 2025).

Comparative Perspectives

Research on African American communities in the United States has documented similar dynamics of concentrated disadvantage, institutional distrust and the emergence of criminal subcultures as alternative status hierarchies (Anderson, 1999, 2020; Sampson & Wilson, 1995). Anderson's (1999) concept of the "code of the street" – an informal system governing interpersonal conflict where formal law enforcement is absent or distrusted – finds strong resonance in participant accounts. The cultural content differs – karama and clan honor in the Arab context, respect and toughness in Anderson's inner-city setting – but the structural logic is strikingly parallel: in both cases, an informal honor code fills the regulatory vacuum left by failing formal institutions.

Research on Turkish and North African immigrant youth in Western Europe similarly documents the role of perceived discrimination and blocked mobility in facilitating criminal involvement among second-generation minorities (Tonry, 1997; Wacquant, 2009). The finding that younger Arab youth in Israel increasingly frame their situation in economic and sociostructural terms rather than through a nationalist lens parallels patterns in second-generation minority communities across Europe. Research on crime in deeply divided societies – Catholic communities in Northern Ireland and post-apartheid South Africa – also highlights the distinctive challenges of policing where the state is perceived as historically complicit in community marginalization. In such contexts, procedural justice interventions face a particularly steep legitimacy deficit.

Implications for Policy and Intervention

The findings point towards a multi-level intervention framework. At the structural level, the evidence supports sustained investment in Arab communities as fulfillment of basic civic obligations: accessible credit, enforceable zoning and construction rights, adequate educational resources and genuine labor market integration. Creating credible legitimate alternatives is the foundational prerequisite for meaningful crime reduction (Roman et al., 2017).

At the institutional level, the findings support community-oriented policing grounded in procedural justice principles (Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Tyler et al., 2015) – policing that is visible, responsive and respectful, that investigates Arab homicides with the same urgency and resources applied elsewhere and that treats Arab citizens as rights-bearing members of the polity rather than as suspects. The homicide clearance rate disparity – approximately four times lower in Arab communities than in Jewish communities – is experienced by community members as a direct measure of their civic worth and is a significant driver of both institutional distrust and retributive violence.

At the community level, the findings highlight the potential of family-based and elder-led frameworks that orient clan authority towards educational and occupational achievement. Such frameworks constitute the primary protective mechanism identified by Group 2 participants and represent a natural anchor for prevention efforts (Mondey & Beerli, 2024). Engaging mosques, schools and local leadership organizations as active partners – rather than passive spectators to a state-led process – is consistent with the evidence and with participants' own demands (Elran et al., 2021).

Educational processes, both formal and informal, represent an additional and critical level of intervention. Beyond providing credentials and pathways to employment, schools, community organizations, youth programs and other educational settings can function as central agents of socialization, strengthening protective factors and facilitating social mobility (Hawkins et al., 2000; Roman et al., 2017). Such frameworks can foster young people's sense of agency, responsibility, leadership and future orientation while providing opportunities for meaningful participation and prosocial engagement. This is particularly important because educational aspirations, positive school attachment, supportive relationships and opportunities for constructive participation can serve as protective resources against violence and gang involvement (Hawkins et al., 2000). Educational processes may also help to redirect young people's needs for belonging and recognition towards educational, occupational and community achievement, thereby strengthening alternative identities and prosocial forms of belonging (Sampson et al., 1997). Importantly, individual empowerment should not be understood as a substitute for addressing the structural barriers identified by participants. Rather, educational empowerment should complement structural and institutional interventions by strengthening young people's capacity for proactive engagement, leadership and constructive participation in their communities. Formal and informal educational frameworks may therefore serve simultaneously as mechanisms of social mobility and as protective environments that expand young people's opportunities to envision and pursue viable futures outside criminal networks (Roman et al., 2017).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations merit acknowledgement. First, the qualitative design and purposive sampling limit generalizability. The sample was restricted geographically to Arab communities in the north and center of Israel, and did not include communities in the Southern/Negev region. This omission is particularly important given evidence that conflict dynamics in the Negev may be more strongly organized around rival hamulas rather than dominant organized crime organizations. The findings should therefore not be generalized to the Southern Arab population. Future research should explicitly compare regions to examine how differences in modernization, locality type, socioeconomic conditions and the continuing authority of the hamula shape youth pathways into and away from criminal involvement. Second, self-report data are subject to social desirability effects, although the qualitative design and assured anonymity were intended to mitigate this risk. Third, while the exclusively male sample reflects the gender composition of organized crime involvement in this context, the experiences of young Arab women affected by community violence, both as victims and as agents of resistance, represent an important under-studied dimension. Future comparative studies might draw on research examining gang disengagement in other contexts (Cruz & Rosen, 2024; Cruz et al., 2023) to develop culturally adapted exit strategies for Arab youth in Israel. Fourth, the study was conducted at a specific moment in a rapidly evolving context; longitudinal designs would better capture the temporal dynamics of community change.

Summary and Conclusions

The six themes presented collectively demonstrate that Arab youth involvement in organized crime is shaped by an interlocking set of cultural, structural, psychological and institutional forces. Neither clan affiliation, nor economic deprivation, nor institutional distrust operates in isolation; rather, they interact dynamically to produce – or prevent – criminal trajectories.

The first theme documents the daily reality of lethal violence and weapon saturation that forms the backdrop against which all decisions are made. The second establishes the structural conditions enabling criminal entry: the pervasive alienation of minority youth from mainstream institutions. The third addresses the psychological interior: the hunger for recognition and *karama* exploited by criminal organizations. The fourth identifies economic marginalization as both diagnosis and political demand. The fifth reveals the hamula as simultaneously shield and conduit – a double-edged mechanism whose criminogenic or protective effects depend entirely on the values of the kinship network. The sixth addresses the crisis of institutional legitimacy – the dual failure of formal policing and traditional *sulha* mechanisms – and the corresponding need for community-oriented, procedurally just approaches to law enforcement and conflict resolution.

The three-way distinction between currently active members, former members and non-involved youth adds analytical depth (Pyrooz et al., 2016). Active participants normalized criminal involvement through economic rationality and collective belonging. Former members offered retrospective accounts marked by regret and critical awareness of entrapment mechanisms. Non-involved participants, facing structurally similar conditions, demonstrated that alienation and deprivation do not deterministically produce criminal trajectories – pointing to family, clan values and individual agency as key protective factors. This younger generation – more sociologically literate, more critical of traditional authority and more demanding of civic rights – must be incorporated into any serious effort to understand and address this crisis.

AI Disclosure

The authors used ChatGPT during the preparation of this work solely to improve the language, readability, and grammatical correctness of the manuscript. No new content, ideas, or data were generated or altered by this technology. The authors reviewed, edited, and approved all suggested changes and accept full responsibility for the final content.

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