

# Street-gang violence in Sweden is a growing concern

## Abstract

Over the past 30 years, Sweden has witnessed a growth in criminal gangs. Gun violence among young males is also on the rise and have only recently gained wide political attention. Street gangs and gun violence are two prevalent, partially overlapping phenomena that constitute social challenges. Empirically supported legal, policy and practical frameworks are needed in order to reduce the prevalence of gangs and gang violence in Sweden. The first step is to recognize that gangs and gang violence are an emerging societal problem and to identify its root causes, organizational dimensions, and operational patterns. In this note, Swedish street gangs and gang violence are briefly discussed.

*Keywords:* Street gangs, gun violence, crime prevention

TWO YOUNG ADULTS are shot dead and eight are injured in a gang-related mass shooting; a car bomb targeting a gang member kills three young men and a four-year-old girl; an eight-year-old boy is killed when a hand grenade is thrown into an apartment in an attempted assassination of a gang member; police stations and police officials are targeted in several hand grenade attacks.<sup>1</sup> This all happened in Sweden in the past three years, and the list goes on. Drive-by shootings commonly associated with American street gangs have now become a reality in Sweden, although with the difference that in Sweden hand grenades are also part of the gang violence. Also, there are signs that there is a clear nexus between gangs and violent extremism in Sweden (Sturup & Rostami, 2017).

Unfortunately, little academic attention has been paid to Swedish street gangs despite a worrying development in the proliferation of gangs and gang related violence in Sweden. Up until recently, authorities have been reluctant to recognize "street gangs" as an emerging internal security challenge. In 2009, the Stockholm Gang Intervention Program (SGIP) started as an attempt to develop innovative gang prevention strategies from the existing international literature on street gangs. Within SGIP, a number of studies came to highlight some essential characteristics of Swedish street-gangs and the

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1 SVT, 22 December 2016; Aftonbladet, 26 January 2016; Aftonbladet, 22 August 2016. SVT, 28 november 2017.

overall gang development in Sweden (e.g., Rostami, Leinfelt, and Holgersson 2012). This note is based on ongoing research<sup>2</sup> that study the organizing of antagonistic groups, and includes the mapping of gun violence in the metropolitan areas Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö.

## Gangs in Sweden

As early as 1941, the so-called *Ligabrottslighet* (gang criminality) in Stockholm was explored by the Swedish national association of social work (*Centralförbundet för Socialt arbete*, 1941). The report stated that there were 322 gangs, containing 1595 members in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö. The report suggested that the crime trend in Sweden is not as alarming as in other countries, however, to prevent the rise of serious crime, it is necessary to "catch and dissolve [the gangs] as soon as possible", [...] instead of tracking and arresting isolated working criminals (*Centralförbundet för Socialt arbete* 1941:41)." During the 1950s and 60s, organized crime and gangs are understood as mainly a foreign phenomenon and it is not until the 1970s that organized crime becomes an established term in Sweden (Rostami, 2016). Since then organized crime is a widely debated topic, even though "gang" is not yet an established concept and the primary focus of Swedish crime policy in the 1980s are illegal drugs and financial crime. However, the embryo of more organized criminal organizations emerged during this period, with the rise of – and conflict between – domestic outlaw motorcycle clubs. With the entry of international outlaw motorcycle clubs at the beginning of the 1990s and the so called Great Nordic Biker War (1994–1997), organized crime and gangs received wider political and media attention and gained a more important role in the Swedish crime policy (Rostami, 2016). Even if street gangs such as The Warriors and later the Original Gangster existed in the early 1990s, it was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that Sweden witnessed the proliferation of street gangs, and it is only recently that street gangs have become recognized as one of the most significant challenges in socio-economically deprived areas.

Rostami, Leinfelt, and Holgersson (2012) studied seven Swedish street gangs and found that Swedish street gangs are criminally both highly active, and diverse. The age of members ranged from 15 to 49 years and the mean age ranged between 22.8 years to 34.0 years, depending on the gang. They found that the Swedish street gangs are ethnically heterogeneous and membership is not related to a specific country of birth or ethnicity. Roughly 42 percent of the gang members are born in Sweden and 76 percent are either first- or second-generation immigrants (from 35 different countries). The life cycle of these street gangs varied between 2 years and 18 years, which is largely in line with reports from North-American and European street-gangs (Klein et al., 2006). The Swedish street-gangs seem to have versatile criminal behavioral patterns featuring a wide array of offenses such as drug-related and weapon offenses, and various violent crimes e.g., robberies, assaults, and homicides. In this study, none of the

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<sup>2</sup> Supported by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.

examined gangs seems to be territorially bounded. However, recent reports indicate that new emerging street gangs have a lesser degree of formal organization, are more violent and territorially bounded, with more rapid and flexible recruitment process (Polismyndigheten, 2017).

## Gang violence

Street gangs and gun violence are two partially overlapping phenomena, and Sweden is witnessing a change in gun violence (Khoshnood 2017). There has been an overall increase in victim-to-perpetrator ratio of a gun violence, which is especially pronounced for individuals under 30 years. Gun violence is becoming more concentrated and cemented in some urban areas. As an example, between 2011 and 2016, 1,165 shootings and 54 hand-grenades attacks were identified in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö, which resulted in over 100 dead and 440 injured. In all three cities there is a significantly elevated risk of a new shooting within a relatively small distance and period in, which are interpreted as an indication of gang-related conflicts (Sturup et al., 2017). In an ongoing study, we estimate that around 35 percent of the homicides in Sweden, between 2007–2011, is linked to organized crime groups such as street gangs. While a gun offender (both in deadly and non-deadly shootings with illicit firearms) in Eastern, Southern, and Western Europe is most likely to be in the age group 30–34, in Northern Europe, the age group of 20–24 is responsible for the largest share. This pattern is explained by a "huge presence of gangs in Sweden who are composed of young men dealing with local criminal activities and internal struggles" (Savona & Mancuso 2017:24).

While the recent development has provoked political debate and policy reactions, more research is needed to increase our understanding of the dimensions of street gangs and the appropriate societal responses. An effective response requires a good understanding of the root causes, organizational dimensions, operational patterns of the crime problem in question, and the distribution of responsibilities between various actors. Future research will address these issues.

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