



Support to defectors
from criminal groups

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English summary of Brå report 2016:6

**The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) –
centre for knowledge about crime and crime prevention measures**

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå)
works to reduce crime and improve levels of safety in society
by producing data and disseminating knowledge on crime
and crime prevention work.

This report is a summary of the Swedish report
Stöd till avhoppare från kriminella grupperingar, report no 2016:6
The Swedish report can be ordered from Brottsförebyggande rådet, info@bra.se

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URN:NBN:SE:BRA-663

Summary¹ and assessment

Combating criminality which is committed by criminal groups has been a prioritised political issue in recent years. Successfully helping more individuals to leave such groups and change their lifestyles can benefit both society and the individual. To date, there has been no comprehensive overview of access to support for defectors² from criminal groups³ or of how well the support meets need in the area. Accordingly, Brå has been instructed by the Government to study this issue. The goal of the study is to increase knowledge regarding the support which is offered to defectors around the country and to contribute to the development of efforts which will enable more people to leave criminal groups.

The results presented in the report are based primarily on survey responses from, and interviews with, defectors from criminal groups, interviews and collated information from programmes which specifically offer support to defectors, and survey responses from regular public programmes within the police, the prison and probation service, and social services.

Criminal groups in Sweden

There are a number of different groups in Sweden in which a number of individuals participate in criminality in some organised fashion. The types of criminal groups primarily included in the study are self-defined organisations, for example motorcycle gangs, suburban-based and urban district-based organisations, and pro-violence white power groups.⁴

There is no public data regarding the number of criminal groups or potential defectors from criminal groups in Sweden. The police's Department of National Operations' (Noa) intelligence division has, however, published a report⁵ identifying 53 areas as vulnerable areas due to criminal influence in the local community. All of these areas contain suburban-based and urban district-based groups and, in certain cases, other types of criminal

¹ An English-language version of this summary is available on Brå's website, www.bra.se. Click on the Publications tab and then enter the report number in the search field.

² *Defector* means a person who is a registered resident of Sweden and who has belonged, or has had ties, to a criminal group in such way that it becomes difficult to leave the group. A defector must also be motivated to leave the criminal group.

³ *Criminal groups* as used in this study means a relatively stable group in which the individuals who are involved are occupied, in an organised manner, with serious crime. The elements of violence and intimidation inherent in the group constitute an important part of the identity of both the group and its members.

⁴ As per consultation with the Ministry of Justice, the study does not include violent religious extremists, youth entering into criminality, or criminals in general, nor does it focus on defectors from other types of criminal groups, such as family and extended family groups, violent political extremists on the left or sports hooligans, since these are uncommon among the parties who work with defectors.

⁵ The Police's Department of National Operations, 2016.

groups as well. According to Noa,⁶ there are also criminal groups in other localities in the country, including self-identified organisations in two localities in addition to those identified in the report regarding vulnerable areas.

Most of the vulnerable areas identified in Noa's study are in Malmö, Gothenburg, and Stockholm, where there are also public authority-run programmes which specifically offer support to defectors from criminal groups. However, according to Noa and Brå's own internet searches, there are criminal groups in at least another 16 cities in the country. In 15⁷ of these cities, there are no public authority-run defector support programmes.

The group becomes a new family

According to research,⁸ there is a series of risk factors which may contribute to an individual joining a criminal group. The risk factors are more or less the same as those for criminal debut in general, and can be divided into five different areas: the individual, family, friends, school, and surroundings.

Most defectors who were interviewed were already engaged in criminality when they joined a group. They often explain the criminal debut as a result of a problematic background with weak family and school ties. This led to them seeking fellowship and acceptance elsewhere, and they found it with the individuals with whom they began to engage in criminal acts. Eventually, they became part of a criminal group, where the fellowship was even stronger. A number of defectors described the organisation as a "family" or "my everything".

The family theme – and more specifically increased family responsibility – is also prominent when defectors, defector support programmes, and the research describe the most common reasons why individuals leave a criminal group – specifically, it is often because one has started a family of one's own.

Another common reason for leaving the group is that the individual has become older and tired of the criminal lifestyle. A third common reason is that the defector was threatened by, or was the victim of violence at the hands of, their group. The threat is often associated with the individual having unpaid debts or having come into conflict with the group for some other reason. However, the threat can also be directly related to the defector's desire to leave the group.

Help in changing identity, and often protection, are necessary for defectors

The need for support among defectors is the same as that found among other individuals who wish to leave a criminal life. However, there are certain needs which distinguish defectors as a group. Above all, these involve

⁶ According to an interview with a representative of Noa, as well as the researchers' own internet searches.

⁷ There is one defector support programme outside of the major metropolitan areas, namely the Police's defector support programme in Bergslagen.

⁸ Descormiers 2013, MacRae-Krisa 2013, Swedish Government Official Report 2010:15.

the frequent need for protection, since many of the defectors have been, or are afraid of being, subject to threats or violence in connection with the defection. Defectors also often have a considerable need for support in changing their identity as gang members and for measures to counteract the solitude that often results from defection.

Range of support available to defectors

Individuals who choose to leave a criminal group can receive support from regular public institutions – such as the police, social services, and the prison and probation service – or from specific defector support programmes.

Brå has identified nine specific defector support programmes in Sweden⁹ to which defectors from criminal groups can turn for support. Four of these are run by different public authorities, primarily social services and the police. The programmes differ in terms of target group, structure, and working method. However, these programmes share certain common features, specifically:

1. identifying the defector's needs;
2. appointing a contact person to provide the defector with support through counselling, practical support, and help with social networks;
3. brokering contact between the defector and public authorities/other parties.

In order to receive support from these defector support programmes, the defector often must also agree to comply with certain requirements, primarily in respect of refraining from drugs and criminality. One of the public authority-run programmes also requires the defector to show that he is at demonstrable risk of harm, while another requires the threatened defector to make a police report in order to gain access to the programme's support.

In total, staff at the defector support programmes, as well as those who responded to the questionnaire issued to regular operational units at the police, social services, and prison and probation service, state that they have had contact with approximately 165 individuals who wished to leave a criminal group during 2014. However, some individuals have been counted more than once in this figure, since the same individuals have sometimes been in contact with different parties, parties then playing different roles in the defection process.

Public authority-run defector support programmes

The police and/or social services are the central parties in respect of public authority-run defector support programmes. The public authority-run defector support programmes are directed only at those defectors who are registered residents of the municipality or police region in which a specific programme is located.

All public authority-run programmes can provide defectors with protection and, with the exception of one, all offer a contact person who

⁹ One of the identified defector support programmes, X-Cons, is not, however, included in the study since they were unable to allocate time or resources to participate.

provides close support to the defector during the process. In addition, the public authority-run programmes primarily adopt the role of an intermediary when measures are required from other agencies, such as the employment service or drug treatment services.

Non-governmental defector support programmes

Unlike the public authority-run defector support programmes, non-governmental defector support programmes are directed towards defectors throughout the country. All of them offer one or more contact persons who act as a pivot point and support the defector with daily activities. They also have a wide range of individual measures such as support through counselling, practical support, occupational training, and supported living. When necessary, they bring in other parties such as social services and the Public Employment Office.

It is not possible for non-governmental defector support programmes to offer protection to defectors who have been threatened by their own groups or by another group unless the threat is exclusively local. Unlike the public authority-run defector support programmes, the staff of these programmes often have personal backgrounds and experiences reminiscent of those of the defectors. Another difference is that the non-governmental defector support programmes may, to a greater extent, encounter problems in obtaining social services financing for measures for defectors, particularly since they often do not formally cooperate with social services.

Brå's assessment is that there is a sufficient number of specific programmes

Brå's assessment, based on the available documentation, is that the number of specialised, public authority-run defector support programmes is sufficient. The demand for support for leaving a criminal group in various parts of the country is probably not sufficiently great at present as to warrant instituting more such programmes.

However, there is a need to improve the conditions for defectors who turn to the regular police or social services in other parts of the country than those in which the public authority-run defector programmes are located. This is, among other things, to provide these defectors with as skilled support as possible.

There may also be cause for the public authority-run specialised programmes to review the possibility of expanding their catchment areas in order to include more defectors.

Regular public operations

The police, social services, and prison and probation services can also offer support to defectors within the scope of their regular operations. However, in general, their possibilities for supporting defectors are worse than those in the specific defector support programmes. The primary reason is that personnel engaged in regular operations are less likely to have:

- specialised skills and experience with the target group;
- earmarked resources and measures for the specific target group (for example, a system with a specific contact person who can support the defector through the entire defection process);
- well-developed contacts with other public authorities and parties surrounding the target group and a coordinated collaboration to ensure that the defector doesn't "fall between the cracks".

The exchange of experience in Sweden needs to increase

In Brå's opinion, the know-how in Sweden in respect of measures to support defectors should reach more people than it does today. This could take place through an increased exchange of experience.

One can discuss the exact way in which such an exchange of experience should be organised. Developing special regional networks regarding measures for defectors from criminal groups where the police, social services, and other affected parties can exchange knowledge and experience would be valuable, but would probably impose demands on time and resources which are inconsistent with the frequency with which matters of this type arise.

A more realistic model might be to explore whether there are other regional networks which could be expanded to include discussions of support to defectors from criminal groups.

In Brå's opinion, one might also consider launching a national telephone service which defectors and public authorities could contact for guidance and referral.

This type of telephone service already exists to support public authorities and relatives of individuals who risk radicalisation and involvement in violent extremism. The target group for this telephone service could, perhaps, be expanded to also include defectors from criminal groups.

Problems regarding cooperation and dissemination of information

Brå's study provides a picture of the defector support programmes performing skilled and engaged work. The public authority-run defector support programmes often have formalised collaboration with different public authorities – and it is specifically this formalisation that is seen as important. The non governmental programmes also cooperate with different public authorities, although often in a less formal way.

However, all defector support programmes depend on functioning cooperation with other public authorities such as the Prison and Probation Service, social services, the Swedish Police, and the Public Employment Office, and, according to interviews with personnel at the defector support programmes, this is where problems sometimes arise.

Social services sometimes come up short in respect of a long-term perspective and knowledge about the target group

The defector support programmes describe social services as the public authority which is most central to the cooperation. The role of social services includes, among other things, financing the various measures offered to the defector in the defector support programme. However, the defector support programmes point out a number of problems which they believe may arise in cooperation with social services. These primarily involve insufficient knowledge and the lack of a long-term perspective, as well as excessively long processing times. In the meantime, defectors who are waiting are at risk of losing motivation.

Prison and Probation Services could be more active

The Prison and Probation Service is a key party in efforts to prevent recidivism for all individuals who have been convicted, including those who are members of criminal groups. The authority also cooperates to some extent with defector support programmes, including informing clients about the programmes and sometimes referring clients to programmes. However, the defector support programmes believe that the Prison and Probation Service could work better both to motivate individuals to defect, and in planning and coordinating the release of defectors. The programmes believe that the Prison and Probation Service could also be better at disseminating information about defector support programmes within its various units.

Brå suggests that the Prison and Probation Service should conduct an inventory of the way in which it works specifically with individuals who wish to defect from criminal groups and, based on its findings, should consider the ways in which this work can be developed.

Many are not aware of the defector support programmes

The results of Brå's defector interviews and questionnaires show that individuals in criminal groups often do not know that defector support programmes exist. They often also have poor knowledge about how these programmes work, the requirements they impose, and the types of support they offer. Moreover, defector support programmes do not presently devote any major resources to attempting to reach individuals who may anticipate defecting. Personnel working within the regular operations of the relevant public authorities also have limited knowledge regarding the defector support programmes which are available.

Brå proposes that the programmes increase their efforts so that more individuals in criminal groups and relevant authorities learn about their work.

Needs and measures

According to the questionnaires completed by defectors, individuals from criminal groups who contact defector support programmes often feel that

they need support in a variety of different areas. According to data collected from the defector support programmes, defectors also require many measures, averaging five each. Different types of support in the form of counselling are most common and are also the type of measure identified by defectors themselves as the most important measure. In addition, other measures include protection, financial support, medical examinations, addiction care, therapy, employment, long-term housing, development of social networks, help with routines, and debt relief assistance.

Protective measures primarily involve housing

As mentioned previously, the need for protection is one factor which distinguishes defectors from criminal groups from other individuals who wish to leave a criminal life. It is primarily the public authority-run programmes which can offer protection to defectors.

The primary need which arises for persons who are threatened are the need for emergency housing and relocation to another locality. Approximately one-half of the defectors who contact defector support programmes are placed into emergency housing and seven of ten move to another locality.

However, the programmes believe that it is difficult to find housing for defectors since the housing market is problematic and because they ordinarily do not have their own housing to offer to defectors. There is also a lack of cooperation within the police in respect of the placement of defectors. There is thus a risk that several defectors could be placed in the same locality, which might lead to security risks.

Counselling support is important for defectors

Supporting defectors via various forms of counselling is a major and important area of work for the defector support programmes. Primarily, counselling support is provided by a contact person – almost all defector support programmes appoint a specific contact person for each defector. This person can be seen as being at the heart of the programme's work: the individual maintains close personal contact with the defector, is often available for conversation and counselling, organises and coordinates measures on behalf of the defector, provides support for routines and life skills, supports the defector in contacts with public authorities, and more.

Counselling support can also be provided by an outpatient psychologist. The nongovernmental programmes also sometimes provide counselling support in the form of programmed activities.

The purpose of counselling is often to satisfy two needs which are typical for defectors as a group: handling the solitude which arises as a result of the defection, and changing one's identity as a "gang member".

It is sometimes difficult to find social networks

Another goal of the defector support programmes is to attempt to help the defector replace the criminal group with new social networks. The defector support programmes do this by encouraging the participants to join

interest organisations, take classes, participate in workplace activities, and so forth. However, a number of defector support programmes have stated that they find it difficult to attain the goal of new networks, particularly when defectors move to an entirely new locality. The programmes can encourage defectors, but it is nevertheless the defector personally who must take the initiative necessary to create new relationships and networks.

The only programme which can completely offer a new social circle is KRIS, an organisation that affords defectors the opportunity to socialise with other former criminals essentially all day long. However, this is not to everyone's taste and there may be a risk that recidivists draw other members of the association back to a life of crime.¹⁰

Assistance with housing, work, and financial maintenance

Many defectors also need new housing, employment, and/or financial assistance. The defector support programmes support defectors in this regard by means of the contact persons assisting defectors in initiating contact with various parties, such as landlords, the Public Employment Office, and social services. The contact persons can also accompany the defector to various meetings, and they support and coach defectors so that they can attain the goals of obtaining housing or a job for example.

Success factors

Part of the government's instructions to Brå involved identifying success factors in the work with defectors. Since there are no evaluations of the effects of the work of the defector support programmes, it has not been possible to specifically ascertain where they have been successful. When asked about success factors in their work, staff at the defector support programmes referred to well-functioning cooperation with various public authorities and certain key measures in the defector process. These key measures were primarily social and motivational support via a contact person, new social networks, and training or work.

In order to obtain a better understanding of the factors contributing to the success of the work with defectors, Brå proposes that the programmes develop systems for regularly following up on their work and its effects. The format of these systems should, preferably, be uniform across all programmes in order to provide the programmes with optimum conditions for the exchange of experiences regarding working methods, measures taken, and results.

¹⁰ Police Authority for Stockholm County, 2014.