



Criminal networks and groups

Police perception of power structures and criminal markets

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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.

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Summary

“Organised crime” is an expression which is used freely in public debate in Sweden. However, the term encompasses a host of different phenomena and forms of organisation, and the import of “organised crime” thus varies depending on who uses the term and how, and when, the term is used.

This report presents a theoretical framework – a conceptual structure – for the various forms of networks, groups, and phenomena that usually fall under the larger “umbrella” known as organised crime.

The purpose of the categorisation is to make it simpler to describe and understand power structures, criminal markets, and the criminality which is carried out by different forms of networks, constellations, and groups.

The second and third parts of the report apply the conceptual structure to various forms of organised crime on the basis of some 60 interviews with police employees and a review of some 60 intelligence reports. This means that the descriptions of organised crime provided in the report articulate the perceptions of the interviewed police employees.

The fourth and final part of the report provides overall reflections. An appendix to the report sets forth police employees’ ideas for measures against various forms of organised crime. These are based on three seminars which were conducted with police employees in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö.

Part 1. The conceptual structure

The basis for the theoretical framework is that there is a criminal underworld which is bound together in various forms of relation-based networks. Groups and constellations are formed in this network-based environment. Four overall categories of groups have been created: *self-defined groups*, *externally-defined groups*, *unnamed groups*, and *project-based constellations*.

These categories contain sub-categories, such as outlaw motorcycle gangs, criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas, and family-based groups.

Notwithstanding the differences between different groups and networks, they are permeated by one central universal constituent element: an intimidation capital. An *individual intimidation capital* entails the general public’s level of fear for a specific individual. A *collective intimidation capital* is the aggregate intimidation capital of the individuals who are included in a group or network. An *emblematic intimidation capital* is, for example, the intimidation capital which is instilled in the trade mark of the syndi-

cate. It can be compared with the way in which a company name or logo is associated with characteristics such as quality and trust.

There are different types of entities which can be instilled with an intimidation capital. The types which have been identified in our study are *groups/networks*, *individuals*, *ethnicity/subculture*, and *area*. There are also various factors which can instil the entities with an intimidation capital. The factors which have been identified are *myths*, *previous violent incidents*, *reputation-building offences*, *media attention*, and *visible, directed public agency actions*.

Self-defined groups

Self-defined groups comprise groups which directly emphasise their group membership in the form of names, attributes, and membership. The category of *self-defined groups* includes, for example, outlaw motorcycle gangs, as well as other gangs which have named themselves.

The *collective* and *emblematic intimidation capital* are central to this form of organisation, and the group's symbols are a constant reminder of the intimidation capital.

Notwithstanding the connection to the group, each person is often an individual, has their own agenda, and can carry out criminal business or execute projects with individuals in or outside of the group to which the person belongs. In other words, the person can be a member of, or form, *project-based constellations* in order to conduct profit-making criminal activities. The members may, however, specifically benefit from the group's intimidation capital if they conduct criminal business under their own auspices. The membership strengthens the individual's criminal CV and becomes a guarantee that the member is trustworthy, which provides access to new criminal schemes and advantages, including in the non-criminal sphere.

Unnamed groups

Unnamed groups is an aggregate name for various types of relation-based networks which have neither a self-conferred nor an externally-conferred name. They often have more diffuse contours than *self-defined groups*, although in certain cases there may be a stronger bond of loyalty between the individuals. Examples of *unnamed groups* include certain city neighbourhood-based and criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas, which are based on residence in the same residential area, as well as certain family-based groups.

Externally-defined groups

Externally-defined groups are groups which do not themselves describe their group membership through names, symbols, and attributes. Instead, they are named either by the police or by the media. This category may, for example, include the criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas which have been externally named, as well as certain family-based groups.

Project-based constellations

Project-based constellations are project groups which are formed in order to execute a profit-making criminal enterprise, for example narcotics smuggling, large-scale theft, or extensive fraud. Just as would be the case for a project group in the legal economy, *project-based constellations* comprise one or more project managers as well as several project collaborators, often with specifically allocated tasks. A *project-based constellation* can comprise individuals from *self-defined groups*, *externally-defined groups*, and *unnamed groups*. Collaborators are recruited on the basis of skills, reliability, reputation, and ability, given the specific function they are to perform in the project group.

Not all individuals who are included in *project-based constellations* are professional criminals. A considerable number of individuals simply assist now and then.

Part 2. Groups and networks in Sweden's three largest cities

In this section, we look more closely at, among other things, the different organisational forms in respect of aspects such as recruitment, internal conflicts and loyalty, access to and handling of firearms, external conflicts, and unlawful influence.

Recruitment to the various groups

Outlaw motorcycle gangs

For the outlaw motorcycle gang (*self-defined groups*), the process of becoming a full member is relatively long and can take several years. In some cases, an entire motorcycle club is recruited. There is a recruitment ladder that applies to both the recruitment of whole clubs and recruitment of individuals, with different steps which must customarily be climbed before full membership is reached. The recruitment base for outlaw motorcycle gangs and their supporter gangs comprise of small clubs and individuals who are established in the criminal underworld.

Some individuals in the subgroups never reach full membership, either because they are not deemed to have what it takes, or because they are discouraged of the long and demanding period as a trial member.

Other self-defined groups

Recruitment to the *self-defined groups* which cannot be classified as outlaw motorcycle gangs is characterised by the fact that their recruitment ladder and process is not as lengthy as that of an outlaw motorcycle gang. Certain self-defined groups are structured like a pyramid scheme, where the business idea is that management earns money from the fees paid by the members. Members may pay an entry fee in order to join, ongoing monthly fees and, ultimately, a larger sum in order to be allowed to exit the gang. In order to further increase the leaders' profit, members can also be fined for perceived injuries. As a result of the business structure, these groups often have more aggressive recruitment than the other groups.

Criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas

The image which is communicated through the interviews is that there is generally no active and focused recruitment to the criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas. It is more the case that certain individuals gradually slide into criminality as a result of the fact that they live in the area and find themselves in an environment with criminally active individuals in the vicinity. Older criminal individuals serve as role models for some younger individuals.

Many of the youth and children who are in the risk zone for being drawn into criminality have not completed school and do not see that they have any future in conventional society. According to the interviewees, a number of them are, or have been, the subject of social welfare agency intervention. Other influencing factors which are emphasised are social exclusion, unstable and segregated residential areas, and discrimination. The interviewees emphasise, however, that most youth in the described areas do not end up in criminal networks. The mere fact of growing up in a socially disadvantaged area does not automatically mean that one will join a gang.

Family-based groups

Individuals are literally born into the family-based groups. As these individuals become older and gain more experience, they can gradually be given greater responsibility. A number of interviewees describe children and youth who grow up in families with a high percentage of individuals with a criminal record. For these youth, the step into criminality is not particularly long.

The family-based groups which conduct comprehensive criminal activities may, according to interviewees, form *project-based constellations* in order to carry out, for example, operations involving narcotics smuggling or distribution of smuggled goods.

Often, the individuals who are recruited to the riskiest tasks are not (according to the interviewees and intelligence reports) a member of the same core family. The recruitment base instead comprises individuals who live in the same area or to whom there is some similar form of connection.

Internal conflicts and loyalty

Under the surface, the groups are often not as homogenous and loyalty-bound as they often wish to present themselves. According to the interviewees, both threats and violence occur within criminal groups and networks. Several of the groups are ruled by violence and are very prone to violence. Punishment can be meted out against one's own in the form of shootings, beatings, robbery, and extortionate fines.

Self-defined groups

According to the interviewees, it is not uncommon for members of the self-defined groups to be self-centred and have their own agenda. In addition, there is both narcotic abuse and alcohol abuse.

Hierarchies and collective rules are applied to keep the groups together. Violations are punished and can, according to interviewees, even lead to exclusion and, in the worst case, lethal violence.

The desire for security which may have been the initial impetus for an individual joining a group may instead be transformed to grave insecurity.

Criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas

The organisational structure of the criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas is often not as formalised as that of the self-defined groups; instead the network structure is built up around certain authoritative actors. Rules and principles for punishment are seldom written but, instead, are formulated arbitrarily by the leaders on a case-by-case basis.

According to several interviewees, many of these individuals are characterised by their desire for quick status and respect and the ease with which they are offended. Few individuals are willing to subordinate themselves for a longer period of time. These characteristics, in combination of substance abuse problems, insufficient loyalty, and big egos, easily lead to discord in the groups. Conflicts and power struggles are very common in the criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas.

As a consequence, many of the criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas have loose and changeable structures. Leadership is challenged, cracks appear, and constellations come and go. If a leader disappears, for example because they are in prison, a web of cracks may begin to appear in the network.

Access to, and handling of, firearms

According to the several interviewees, the way in which individuals in the criminal underworld arm themselves has changed since around 2000. The stated reason is that the climate in the criminal underworld has become tougher. Criminals feel that they must arm themselves in order to be able to defend themselves against other criminals.

A number of interviewed police officers believe, however, that a number of individuals in the criminal underworld purchase pistols for no actual purpose. They are neither threatened nor intend to use the weapon, but nevertheless want one. Weapons have become, to a greater level than before, an attribute of a criminal lifestyle.

The interviewees have determined that there is good access to weapons in the criminal underworld. This applies in particular to pistols. The perception is that if someone in the criminal underworld wants a weapon, they can get one. Weapons also wander between individuals in the various underworlds and constellations. It is not uncommon for the same weapon to be used in several different shootings. According to an interviewed police officer, it is very rare for a criminal individual to get rid of their weapon after a shooting. This happens, in principle, only if they have murdered someone. The simple explanation for keeping the weapon is that it would become too expensive to get a new one. According to several interviewees, many of the individuals who belong to criminal networks and groups do not, despite their criminal activity, have much disposable income.

Most of the visible weapons which circulate in the criminal underworld are produced in the Czech Republic and the former Yugoslavia. A majority of these weapons are assessed to have originated in caches from when the Eastern Bloc fell or from the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. The

weapons caches were dispersed in various ways and weapons are now spread out over essentially the entire world.

Outlaw motorcycle gangs

Several interviewees recount that certain outlaw motorcycle gangs have appointed individuals who are responsible for arming the outlaw motorcycle gang as a whole. However, it is uncommon for the police to find firearms carried by members of an outlaw motorcycle gang. On the other hand, hidden firearms have been found which are determined to belong to an outlaw motorcycle gang or an individual member.

Several interviewees posit that there is information which indicates that outlaw motorcycle gangs use tactical weapon depots. This may involve buried weapons in the vicinity of clubhouses and residences or some other strategic location. A depot does not necessarily contain a large quantity of weapons but may, instead, contain 2-3 weapons.

According to interviewees, there are also weapons stored by other individuals, known as goalkeepers. For example, individuals in support gangs may be used for this purpose. Weapons can also be stored with individuals in one's circle of acquaintances, preferably individuals who do not have a criminal record.

Criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas

According to the interviewees, access to firearms is an important status symbol for individuals in the criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas. However, those individuals who know that they will often be stopped by the police avoid carrying weapons. Firearms are instead hidden, not infrequently somewhere in the vicinity of the individual's residence, or it is stored with an acquaintance, for example in a girlfriend's apartment or in a basement storage area.

If, however, an individual is involved in a conflict there may be a need for quick access to a weapon. A typical task for individuals who are not high on the criminal career ladder is thus to serve as a weapon carrier. They are not stopped as frequently as more known criminals. Their task is to deliver weapons, by car or moped, upon demand. In this way, a weapon is never farther away than a telephone call. The car or the moped can also be an escort vehicle to maintain a state of readiness should an emergency situation arise. Using the escort vehicle, a weapon can be quickly removed from the crime scene following the shooting. Parked cars are sometimes used as weapon depots.

External conflicts

Not infrequently, the media describes gang wars as a battle for market shares – terminology borrowed from legal commercial life – although the methods in the criminal underworld can be violent. Most interviewees believe, however, that gang wars for market shares are very uncommon. It is believed that the shootings which take place usually concern conflicts between individuals which arise as a result of perceived offences and injuries. Only a few cases are linked to battles for territory.

The initial spark for the personal conflict varies. According to the interviewees, the criminal underworld comprises a large number of individuals

with a low level of tolerance who are quick to take offence, and this often leads to discord. The pivotal offences may have been based on something business-related, for example an unpaid debt. However, the conflict is often triggered by something which is trifling in nature. The person who is attacked must, in turn, maintain their status and honour, which can lead to a retaliatory action. The carousel of personal vendettas thus begins to turn, and more and more individuals can be drawn into the conflict.

Based on the collected data material, four categories of shootings which can be linked to conflicts have been created: *emotional shootings*, *tactical, semi-planned shootings*, and *premeditated murders*. In addition to these categories, there are three additional categories which are not related to conflicts: *accidental shootings*, *sport shootings*, and *celebratory shootings*.

Outlaw motorcycle gangs

Interviewees define the outlaw motorcycle gang as relatively disciplined, and they are therefore not as impulsive in their violent acts as a number of other constellations, although members may commit unplanned violent crimes in the heat of the moment. The outlaw motorcycle gang ordinarily conducts a consequence analysis and attempt to find a nonviolent solution.

The picture which is communicated is that the structure of outlaw motorcycle gangs is such that a thorough internal discussion is necessary before they decide to turn a conflict situation into violent incidents. They must weigh the consequences of such a decision for the club as a whole, not only nationally, but also internationally. Violent conflicts can be costly and attract unwanted attention. Violent incidents against competitors or individuals with serious influence in the criminal underworld are thus well planned and considered, as well as cleared and sanctioned at a high management level.

According to several interviewees, when decisions are taken to execute violent actions, it is customary that the job be given to persons lower in the hierarchy, for example in support gangs. It may also happen, however, that individuals from these support gangs commit violent acts which are not sanctioned by the organisation as a whole. Many of the support gangs are described as having problems with internal discipline. It happens that individuals misunderstand orders and directives, misunderstand what they may or may not do, or quite simply don't care about the rules.

Other self-defined groups

Self-defined groups which are newly created or still in their establishment phase are, according to several interviewees, often more prone to use violence than already established groups. This is because they need to build up their collective intimidation capital and become respected in the criminal underworld.

Criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas

When compared with outlaw motorcycle gangs, the individuals in the criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas are generally more event-driven and spontaneous in their use of violence. Their decision-making procedures are not as structured as in the outlaw motorcycle gang but instead, the decision is taken on an individual level. The consequence of this is that they can often decide to go from word to violence with short

notice. As a result, it is believed that a considerable number of shootings are not particularly planned. The individual's impulsivity can lead to their jumping into a conflict without thinking about the consequences. When a rival has been challenged, it is not possible to step back without losing credibility.

Several of the interviewees talked about a form of generational and attitudinal shift in the criminal underworld taking place through the criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas. A young generation of individuals with criminal records who do not shrink from committing violence has appeared.

Family-based groups

According to the criminal intelligence service and several interviewees, many of the criminal family-based groups are characterised by the ease with which they commit serious violence. Several of the groups' cores are permeated by traditional norms which entail that perceived injuries and offences must be responded to in order for the group to maintain its honour and respect. As a consequence, even very trivial conflicts can result in serious violence and use of firearms. There is also a great deal of internal violence.

Several interviewees are of the opinion that an alternative legal system has arisen in which certain individuals may have acquired, due to a combination of power and religion, a mediating function in certain conflicts. Negotiation about the conflict or a finding of guilt, take place in that forum. For example, a "judgment" may be that "fines" must be paid. The group's internal justice system, in combination with its own "banks" for lending and other functions, leads to the creation of a "society within society". Several interviewees are of the opinion that public agencies find it difficult to gain insight into this parallel society.

Unlawful influence

The interviewees believe that unlawful influence on the part of organised crime is exercised against a variety of different professional categories and functions, for example decision-making municipal public servants, guards, school personnel, administrators at the Social Insurance Agency, social workers, general practice doctors, and property caretakers. However, the scope of these problems is unclear. The level of knowledge is insufficient and there is a great deal of speculation and guesswork.

The form of unlawful influence which is most clearly highlighted by both interviewees and intelligence reports is unlawful influence against injured parties and witnesses. Several interviewees believe that unlawful influence against witnesses and injured parties is a greater problem than unlawful influence against public agency personnel.

A number of the interviewees assert that primarily injured parties and witnesses who are personally part of the criminal underworld are at risk of being subject to unlawful influence. The interviewees believe, however, that it is uncommon for the threat to transition to a concrete act. The purpose is to frighten, not to effectuate the threat.

Criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas

The form of unlawful influence against public agency personnel most often described in the interviews are the riot-like situations which sometimes flare up in certain socially disadvantaged areas. In these cases, the precipitating factor has often been the unexpected presence of a public agency, for example when emergency services are called in or the police carry out an intervention.

In addition to the riot-like situations, there are also more demarcated cases of unlawful influence. There is a threatening climate in some suburbs and city neighbourhood areas in respect of police in the field, and certain police officers and police stations in these areas become symbolic figures for specific police activities.

The description given by several interviewees is that many individuals in the criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas have difficulty with authority, are easily provoked, and have an arrogant attitude. These factors contribute to an increased risk that unlawful influence can arise in conjunction with meetings with the police.

Residents in certain city neighbourhoods and areas can also be subject to unlawful influence by criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas. Here as well, the interviewees find self-censorship to be common.

Self-defined groups

An earlier survey regarding unlawful influence against police in Sweden stated that individuals linked to outlaw motorcycle gangs represented 28 per cent of incidents of harassment, violence, or vandalism from organised crime (Brå 2009:7). Police and other law-enforcement agency personnel are not, however, the only persons exposed to unlawful influence by outlaw motorcycle gangs and other self-defined groups. The interviews also identified public servants at municipalities and agencies with supervisory and control functions, as well as municipal politicians.

According to the interviewees, it is common for the self-defined groups to play on their bad reputation, which means that, in principle, they do not need to use any express threat. The threat is made through subtle insinuations and signals, for example by being at the same place as agency employees. This usually occurs in a way that is difficult to prove.

Part 3. Informal economy and profit-making activities

According to several interviewees, many criminal constellations and individuals make a profit on the so-called informal economy which exists in the three major cities. This involves goods and services which are inexpensive as a result of tax offences and other criminality. Examples include unlicensed taxis, sales of “tax-free” cigarettes in corner shops, alcohol, stolen goods, undeclared foodstuffs, and undeclared labour. Cash industries such as restaurants are “a hub of the criminality”. In addition to undeclared labour, they handle smuggled alcohol and cigarettes, as well as drugs. Illegal gaming also takes place. Individuals with ties to the criminal underworld can also, via strawmen, own restaurants, small shops, and so forth. There are also suspicions that money is laundered in restaurants.

There is a great risk that the informal economy can have a domino effect. Several interviewees are of the opinion that traders who cheat and violate the rules can force competing businesses to also take the step into the informal economy.

As stated previously, the profit-making criminal activities are seldom homogenous on a group-by-group basis but, instead, are more likely to be carried out by individuals from various group categories joining forces and forming project-based constellations. The profit-making criminality may be focused on smuggling and sale of various goods, for example narcotics, doping substances, weapons, alcohol, tobacco, and stolen goods.

The activities can also be focused on more parasitic criminality such as robbery, organised theft, blackmail, and fraud.

A third direction which the activities may take is offering various types of services, for example, gaming and illegal clubs, organised undeclared labour, debt collection, cash loans, prostitution and labour force exploitation.

Part 4. Overall reflections

The report's overall analysis and discussion highlights three areas which are deemed particularly central to the discussion.

- Problem formulation
- Criminal networks and groups
- Socially disadvantaged areas

Problem formulation

The statement of results shows that aspects such as recruitment, internal and external conflicts, access to and handling of firearms, and an ability to exercise unlawful influence may differ significantly between different types of networks and groups.

It is thus less appropriate to use umbrella terminology such as “organised crime” or “serious organised crime” when formulating detailed crime prevention and law enforcement strategies.

In conjunction with measures against an organised crime-related phenomenon, it is therefore important to have taken a clear decision as to the specific problem the measures are aimed at addressing and the goal of the venture. The conceptual structure describing various forms of organised crime and the description of profit-making criminal activities which was introduced in this report should serve as an aid for such an analysis.

The criminal networks and groups

The statement of results describes how the map of the criminal underworld in Sweden has been redrawn within the past twenty years. According to interviewees, the new feature is that the number of coalitions in the criminal underworld have increased dramatically at the same time as self-defined groups with names and attributes which clearly show group membership have appeared.

Self-defined groups and externally-defined groups in particular have become something of a model and a source of inspiration in the criminal underworld. The media's reporting has further contributed to highlight-

ing the concept of groups. Once the ball is rolling, public agencies find it difficult to stop the trend.

Loyalty within groups is, however, many times illusory. Although members of the same group may back each other up when necessary, it is very common for individuals in the criminal underworld to be self-centred and put themselves first. This is also one of the reasons for the mobility between various groups and networks described by several interviewees.

It is very rare that the purpose of groups is to serve as criminal organisations in which profit-making offences are committed by group members acting jointly and in a certain designated order, more or less like any company. Instead, it is the individuals who see an advantage in belonging to a group. Security and contacts, among other things, were mentioned above; this is the way in which the groups can be regarded as criminal organisations – something which facilitates one's own criminality, but hardly an organisational architect of profit-making criminality.

In terms of society, the growth of groups and networks has become a problem. Particularly self-defined and externally-defined groups, as well as unnamed groups linked to suburbs and families, challenge the public authorities' ability to maintain law and order. Conflicts which arise between individuals and groups in the criminal underworld lead to shootings in public places. This can lead to people feeling unsafe and can reduce the legitimacy of societal institutions. This applies particularly to the socially disadvantaged areas where groups have gained far too much latitude to act. In summary, there are, therefore, strong reasons to combat the groups.

Socially disadvantaged areas and the phase model

The statement of results describes the set of problems in certain socially disadvantaged areas and how criminal groups based in socially disadvantaged areas have gained a footing. Many areas which are characterised by both social vulnerability and criminality are deemed to need long-term efforts in order to gradually reduce criminality and increase security. A cooperation project, for example between the police and a municipality, which is intended to take place over a longer period of time with a focus on a complex set of problems, imposes significant demands in terms of planning, prioritisation, and communication. In order to attain the best possible result, the order in which the measures entailed in the plan should be carried out requires a well-thought out strategy. Otherwise, there is a great risk that attempting to attack all of the problems at once will set the stakes too high. The report describes a strategy – the phase model – which can be applied in conjunction with long-term cooperation projects against crime and insecurity in disadvantaged areas. The basis for the phase model is that the area can be in three different phases and each phase offers different conditions for both law enforcement and crime prevention work.