

Street Gang Involvement Among Nordic Youth: A comparative study on prevalence and risk factors in Nordic countries

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The opinions expressed in this policy brief are the author's own and do not reflect the view of the Nordic Research Council for Criminology.

Findings

- This study is based on the fourth sweep of the global comparative International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD4) and has used the Eurogang measurement for analyzing gang involvement and gang characteristics.
- At the country-level, street gang involvement among youth aged 13-17 was highest in Sweden (11 %). It was significantly higher than in Denmark (7 %), Iceland (6 %), and Norway (6 %). There were no statistically significant differences between Sweden and Finland (9 %). It should be noted, however, that the study was based on city samples, and thus, the results are not representative at the national level.
- Youth involvement in street gangs was more prevalent in Stockholm (SE; 16%) than in any other included Nordic city. In other cities, Næstved (DK), Randers (DK), Gävle (SE), Oslo (NO), Reykjavík (IS), and other Icelandic areas than Reykjavík (IS) the prevalence ranged from five (other Icelandic areas than Reykjavík) to nine percent (Helsinki).
- Young people who were involved in a street gang were more likely to commit property crimes (vandalism and shoplifting), violent crimes (group fights and assault) and to sell drugs.
- Having close friends who belong to a gang was most prevalent in Stockholm (16 %). The difference was statistically significant to all other cities except Gävle (12 %). In other cities the prevalence ranged from five (Randers) to ten percent (Oslo and Helsinki).
- The gang involved youth were more likely young adolescents with lower parental and self-control and higher level of delinquent friends, pro-criminal attitudes, life-time violent crime and perceived neighborhood crime.
- The street gang involvement was most prevalent in cities with higher average family strain, perceived discrimination, peer delinquency, and pro-crime attitudes.

Background

The project analyzed gang involvement and pro-criminal attitudes among adolescents between the age of 13 to 17 years in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden using representative school samples. More than 9 000 young people from Stockholm (SE), Gävle (SE), Oslo (NO), Helsinki (FI), Turku (FI), Randers (DK), Næstved (DK), Reykjavík (IS) and other Icelandic areas than Reykjavík took part in the project.

The project provided up-to-date, comparative insights into the prevalence of youth street gang involvement and associated risks, thereby informing policy development. According to our findings, there is variation between the Nordic countries and cities, with Stockholm being a clearly distinct context in youth street gang connections. However, there are street gang-involved youths in all studied Nordic cities and countries – and the prevalence does not appear to have changed substantially during the last decade. Moreover, the group of young people belonging to street gangs is a special target group for criminal policy, as they commit significantly more different crimes than other young people.

The scope of gang research is extensive, spanning various disciplines within the social sciences and integrating a diverse range of scholarly works. The academic exploration of gangs dates back nearly a century, beginning with Thrasher's seminal 1927 study of gangs in Chicago.

Currently, gang research has significantly evolved from its sociological and human ecology origins, drawing interest from fields including anthropology, criminology, economics, epidemiology, mathematics, psychology, and sociology.

In Nordic countries, although gang research is still emerging, the phenomenon of gangs and related criminal activities has been a subject of discussion since the early 20th century. The issue has recently come to the forefront in the Nordic countries, especially in Sweden, due to a notable increase in gang-related violence. Central to this issue are juvenile street gangs, primarily in disadvantaged communities.

This project adopts the Eurogang definition and measurement of a street gang, which stipulates that “a street gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity”. Focusing on juveniles aged 14 to 17 in from nine Nordic cities from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, this project employed advanced comparative International Self-Report Delinquency Survey methodology (ISR4)* and representative school samples (N = 9 039) from nine Nordic cities (in Iceland we collected data from Reykjavík and areas outside Reykjavík).

Nordic relevance

The differences between the Nordic countries in criminal gang violence, for example, are clearly distinctive.

On the other hand, there has been no up-to-date comparative information on how adolescents' connections to street gangs differ between Nordic cities and countries. This group is central in terms of criminal policy, as young people are a potential source of recruitment and even participation for serious gang crime.

The recent surge in gang activities in parts of the Nordic countries has underscored the need for region-specific research and policy responses. Thus, the implications of this project's cross-Nordic comparison extend beyond the realm of academic inquiry. It provides a basis for policymakers to understand the extent and significance of the street gang phenomenon for younger age groups and to develop targeted strategies combating gang-related crime. Furthermore, by contributing to the global body of knowledge on gangs, this study enhances international understanding of street-gangs and policy learning.

Recommendations

- Young people involved in street gangs are an essential target group for criminal policy, as they commit more crimes than others and can also end up being recruited into even more serious criminal gangs. The prevention of the most serious gang crime and youth street gangs are intertwined, although the means of criminal policy also differ between them (e.g. in the terms of legislation and repressive measures).

- Based on our findings, adolescents' involvement in street gangs is most prevalent where serious gang crime is also most common. However, youth street gangs should not be considered too direct indicators of more serious gang crime because, outside of Stockholm, the prevalence of such groups is relatively even in Nordic cities.
- The risk factors for street gang involvement are most strongly related to the criminal behavior and pro-criminal attitudes of young people and their friends. In preventing youth street gangs, it is essential to focus especially on adolescents and youth groups who are criminally active.
- The connections of social marginalization with street gang involvement were weak. This further emphasizes that the preventive measures should be targeted especially at young people who commit crimes, preferably as early as possible. The low importance of social marginalization can also indicate that the gang-like behavior patterns of young people in the Nordic countries have spread beyond the original disadvantaged communities and areas.

Outputs

Kaakinen, M., Moeller, K. Valdimarsdóttir, M. Westfelt, L. Vassard, A., & Rostami, A. (forthcoming). Gang involvement among adolescents in Nordic countries: a comparative study on associated risk factors.

Villman, E. & Kaakinen, M. (in press).
Nuorten vakavan rikollisuuden ja
jengiväkivallan ehkäisy Ruotsissa ja
Tanskassa: katsaus arviointitutkimuksista
[Preventing severe and gang-related violence
in Sweden and Denmark: a review of
evaluation studies]. Publications of the
Ministry of Justice, Reports and guidelines.

Presentations at academic conferences

Eurocrim 2023 Florence “Street gangs and
juvenile delinquency: a comparative study
based on Nordic ISRD4 Eurogang module”

Eurocrim 2023 Florence “Selective Social
Control of Immigrant Youth in the Nordic
countries”

NfSK 2023 Research seminar Hämeenlinna,
Finland “Selective Social Control of Immi-
grant Youth in Iceland”

The Social Science conference at the Univer-
sity of Iceland 2023 “Hate crime victimiza-
tion”

The Policing and society conference at the
University of Akureyri 2023 “Violent victimi-
zation of young immigrants in Iceland”

Eurocrim 2022 Malaga “Street Gang Involvement
Among Nordic Youth: A comparative
project”

Media appearances

Members of the project have appeared active-
ly in media in project-related topics, includ-
ing tv, radio, newspapers, periodicals and
social media.

Example appearances:

19.12.2023 Preventing youth gang
involvement – Newspaper article

- [Så kan barn hållas borta från gängen](#)

5.12.2023 Hate crime victimization in
Iceland - Newspaper article

- [„Kynþáttur skiptir máli á Íslandi í dag“ - Heimildin](#)

9.10.2023 Youth violence and gangs in the
Nordic countries - Evening news in Iceland

- [Kastljós - Deila Ísraels og Palestínu, ungt fólk og ofbeldi | RÚV Sjónvarp \(ruv.is\)](#)

6.10.2023 Current Street Gang Crime in Fin-
land – Newspaper Article (Helsingin Sano-
mat)

- [Nämä neljä mittaria kertovat totuuden Suomen katujengitilanteesta \(hs.fi\)](#)

5.10.2023 Preventing gang violence in Fin-
land and other Nordic countries – a Current
Affairs Program in the Finland’s national
public broadcasting company YLE

- [A-Talk: Miten jengiväkivaltaa torjutaan? \(yle.fi\)](#)

24.4.2023 Youth use of weapons in Iceland - Morning radio

- [Bítið - 7% ungmenna segjast bera vopn til að verja sig - Útvarp - Vísir \(visir.is\)](#)

19.1.2023 Risk factors for Swedish youth suspected of homicide – Newspaper article

- [Majoriteten mordmisstänkta har klarat grundskolan \(Dagens Nyheter\)](#)

Knowledge gaps and future research needs

More longitudinal studies would be needed in the study of young people's involvement in street gangs. In this way, the temporal dynamics between possible risk factors and street crime could be analyzed. This would further help in the design of more effective street gang crime prevention interventions.

There would also be a need for more gang research utilizing Nordic register data on police-recorded crimes and identified street gangs, for example. Representative data collected in schools are the golden standard in the study of self-reported crime among young people.

Without these data, it is not possible to draw reliable conclusions about the prevalence of young people's criminal behavior and victimization experiences and their temporal trends. However, this project found significant challenges in implementing school surveys in all Nordic countries.

The challenges were partly related to the global COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions, but even more to getting cities and schools to participate in the research cooperation. In the Nordic countries, there is a wider need for political solutions on how to secure the continuation of school surveys, which are central to criminal policy.

**International Self-Report Delinquency Study* is an ongoing international self-report crime survey aiming to describe and explain adolescents' experiences with crime and victimization, to test criminological theories, and to develop crime prevention. The Nordic gang study was conducted in the context of [ISR4-4 sweep](#) (2021–2023) with over 50 countries participating worldwide.

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The project

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NSfK

The Nordic Research Council for Criminology serves to promote criminological research in the Nordic region, and provides the governments with assistance in criminological matters and information on Nordic criminology.