

Introduction

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In recent years, attention surrounding gang crime and organized crime, often described using the term *criminal networks*, has increased in the Nordic countries.

To claim that these are new issues in criminal policy ignores history. Gang and youth crime have periodically been described as a growing problem in the Nordic countries since the 1950s, attracting significant interest within criminal policy circles and the media (Hauge 1968). Gangs were, and remain, an urban phenomenon, often influenced by foreign role models, particularly from the USA (Cohen 1972). In Oslo, so-called youth riots broke out in the wake of the film *Rock Around the Clock* in 1956. Later, in 1958, reports emerged of youths dressed in black with long hair-dubbed the “Blackie Gang” by the media. How the youth described themselves should ring a few bells:

“What we all had in common was having nowhere to go and no money. Half of those involved now have neither a job nor a place to live; they scrape by through petty theft, blackmailing homosexuals-or panhandling.” (Hauge 1968, p. 1)

The media provided a name to the loose group, a practice that remains common today. The group of young men displayed signs of marginalization: they were homeless and unemployed, they sought company, and parts of their activity involved what we today would label threats and violent acts, possibly hate crimes. This was street-level activity, a characteristic that still defines certain types of youth crime today, such as street robberies (Balvig 2017, Larsson 2026).

Juvenile delinquency became a significant field of study within Nordic criminological research during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1960, Nils Christie earned his doctorate with a thesis on “Unge norske lovovertredere.” On average, offenders were significantly younger then than they are today (Möglestue 1958, Sveri 1958). Since then, gang activity and juvenile delinquency have repeatedly emerged and receded as topics of interest. In the late 60’s cannabis smoking long haired youth in central Oslo, hippies, attracted attention and ignited the following fear of a drug epidemic (Lind 1974). From the late 1970s through the 1980s, demonstrations and riots – particularly those involving groups of punks and homeless youth – made the headlines and came to be seen as a social problem. In the 80s, the police and youth connected to the Blitz house engaged in what seemed to be ritualized street

battles¹. However, the heyday of gangs in Norway was the 1990s and early 2000s, when the A-gang, Young Guns and B-gang dominated the headlines. These gangs were primarily composed of individuals of Pakistani origin; there were periods marked by conflict, open violence, and shootings in public spaces between the rival gangs.

Since the 1990s, recorded youth crime began to decline in many Western countries (Balvig 2017, Larsson 2026). Young people were increasingly portrayed as prudent, oriented toward mainstream societal values such as education, sports, and family (Ødegård and Pedersen 2021). In many Nordic countries, youth crime rates in 2026 remain significantly lower than they were a few decades ago. Nevertheless, since the turn of the millennium, there has been considerable research in the field of gangs and youth crime, perhaps most notably in connection with the Eurogang projects. Today, the fear of gang-affiliated youth holds a strong grip on the media and political discourse in the Nordic countries. Something has changed.

Organized crime first became a topic in Nordic criminal justice policy during the 1990s. The exception to this rule was Sweden² (Larsson 2018, Korsell and Larsson 2011). In the 1970s and 1980s, the term organized crime was virtually synonymous with extensive and serious drug-related offenses. From the early 1990s, biker gangs such as the Bandidos and Hells Angels came to epitomize organized crime, alongside the somewhat more nebulous threat posed by criminal organizations from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries.

A persistent challenge lies in delimiting and defining organized crime (Lampe 2016, Larsson 2018). At the core of organized crime is activity requiring a certain level of organization and cooperation among actors sharing the goal of committing offenses. The EU definition states: *An organized criminal group is a group of three or more persons existing over a period of time acting in concert with the aim of committing crimes for financial or material benefit.* Defining and applying this concept in practice has consistently proven difficult, as it is often hard to establish clear indicators of what constitutes cooperation to commit offenses and to isolate the significance of the criminal activity itself within the group's operations (Larsson 2022). Similar difficulties arise when defining gangs: how many individuals are required, must they possess a group identity, and how central is criminal activity? One often observes—at least in European and Nordic studies—that gangs and organized crime groups can be very loosely structured; members rarely identify with the gang or group, the groups often lack names, membership fluctuates, and ties to specific neighbourhoods or areas may be weak. This loose structure is reinforced by the growing importance of the internet and communication platforms for both gangs and organized crime groups (Larsson 2026). A Danish study indicates a significant difference between the MC-groups and the street gangs concer-

1. Heiberg et. Al.1989.

2. In Sweden, there was considerable attention on organized crime, primarily linked to economic crime in the 1970s (Korsell 2023).



ning length of membership. Almost half of the members of the MC-groups were in 2018 registered as members for five years or more. This was only the case for less than one tenth of the street gangs (Ribe 2018). Another question is: where does the line between a gang and an organized crime group lie? They blur into one another, both in real life and in how the police and media describe them. Researchers often highlight two key distinctions: organized crime involves better planning and is primarily driven by the pursuit of profit. In this context, it is interesting to note how the concept of the *gang*, *gäng* in Sweden or *bande* in Denmark, (Sausdal and Hannerz 2025) is central to criminal policy, whereas in Norway, the same phenomenon is referred to as *criminal networks*. Does this mean that Norway lacks gangs, or that organized crime is less significant in Sweden? There is little evidence to suggest this; rather, the terminology itself appears to act as a shaping force within criminal policy, and we find what we look for. These are among the points raised in the contributions in this anthology.

As if the concepts of *gang* and *organized crime* did not create enough complications, the term *criminal network* has been increasingly used the past decade. In Norway, the term has developed a life on its own since 2018, when the National Police Directorate and the Director of Public Prosecutions decided that police districts should report on criminal networks within their areas. A national initiative targeting criminal networks was launched in the summer of 2019 (NOU 2020:4). This initiative was mainly kicked off by the activity of criminal groups and activity in southern Oslo³.

Network perspectives are not new in sociology or criminology. The concept of *criminal networks* mainly stems from the police where network analysis has been used at least since the mid-90s⁴ (Campana 2016; Morselli 2010). A key aspect of the term *criminal networks* is that it is significantly more open-ended than terms like gang or organized crime. In principle, it can encompass almost any criminal activity. The term is defined this way in NOU 2020:4: *Criminal networks are defined as cooperation between individuals regarding crime, without the cooperation involving any specific structure or organization* (p. 19). This means that the hassle of proving cooperation and structure can be dumped. In principle, this can mean that more or less anything can be called criminal networks, given that crime is most often a social act committed in connection with other people⁵ (McIntosh 1975).

The term criminal networks-or simply CN-has come to dominate almost entirely in Norway. Norway experienced something bordering on a moral panic in 2023 – 2025 when police figures revealed an increase in reported

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3. One such group named itself Young Bloods, many of these boys are still active today in different constellations and the area are still considered a hot spot.
 4. Particularly for analysis software such as Analyst's Notebook, which has been used by Nordic police forces for more than 25 years.
 5. As Sutherland aptly described in his theory of differential association.



offenses involving young boys under the age of 15. This coincided roughly with a wave of violence within organized criminal circles in Sweden reaching a level previously unseen in the Nordic region. These two factors converged, and the fear that *Swedish conditions* might spread to Norway triggered a mobilization to do something to counteract such a development. Few, if any, asked if this was a realistic scenario. The impact of this fear was particularly pronounced during the 2025 election year (Larsson 2026).

Also seen in contributions in this anthology terms are used somewhat confusingly and overlapping. While the term *criminal networks* can be useful, particularly in the realms of criminal justice policy and crime analysis, from an academic perspective, it is notoriously unwieldy (Larsson 2026). Its use in public debate paves the way for claims that are difficult to substantiate—such as the thousands of individuals linked to these networks⁶ or the total number of criminal networks in existence. It seems like few if any knows what we are counting. The figures quickly become sensational and take on a life of their own, yet no one can truly grasp what they actually signify.

Had anyone predicted two decades ago that youth crime and gangs would become the paramount issue in criminal justice policy—leading to sweeping changes in policy, legislation, and sentencing severity—most would likely have dismissed it as unrealistic. Yet, to varying degrees, this is precisely the situation in the Nordic countries today.

Privacy policy, the rule of law, equality before the law, and the principle that children and young people should not be subjected to imprisonment are no longer taken-for-granted fundamental values. Debates about lowering the age of criminal responsibility like in Denmark 2010-2012⁷ and now Sweden⁸, as well as doubled sentences and other repressive tactics for gang members have now become commonplace.

“The war” on the gangs has been dominated by a cry for tougher reactions, longer sentences and a general turn towards a belief in the use of punishment and deterrence. Like Sausdal and Hannerz (2025) point out this has not been an isolated occurrence, but a part of a more general punitive move in Nordic penal policy. The fear of gang crimes was central in election campaigns in Norway 2025 and Sweden this year (Larsson 2026). If there ever was such a thing as Scandinavian exceptionalism (Pratt 2007) it now seems to be wearing thin.

6. 67 000 linked to criminal networks in Sweden is one such magic number.

7. The age of criminal responsibility was lowered for a period of 18 months and the maximum length of a prison sentence of 8 years against a person under age 18 was removed permanently from the law (Storgaard 2022).

8. It has been lowered to 14 years, but proposals were made to lower it further to 13 for serious offenses.



Denmark seems to be a frontrunner in repressive measures towards gang members (Sausdal and Hannerz 2026)⁹. In 2009 the first collection of law amendments and additions directed at gang members was introduced. This was the first out of a total (so far) of four so-called “gang packages” (bandepakker). Number II, III and IV followed in 2014, 2017 and 2023. Those packages have among many other things introduced: double penalty ranges for members of gangs, convicted for a large number of crimes if the crime is “likely to provoke a conflict” between groups where weapons are involved in conflicts; prohibition of back patches (rygmærker); police authority to define specified stop-and-search-zones which allows the police to stop-and-search everybody without concrete suspicion; special unit to investigate economy of gangs with the power to carry out secret search (ransagning); exclusion from release on parole of individuals who the police define as related to a group, which is actively involved in conflict with another group and weapons have been used in this conflict and in addition mandatory participation in an exit-programme as condition for release on parole if a prisoner is sentenced in accordance with the double penalty range mentioned above. Recently preventive measures have been included in the gang-packages as well. It is specifically remarkable that in all cases the identification of relationship to a group (gang) relies on information from the police. And insight in the criterion for being identified as a gang member is not possible.

The strong focus on repressive measures in the attempt to avoid gang related crime has been questioned in this issue by Minke, Henningsen et al., and Johansen and Fynbo (VIVE 2025).

The Danish Supreme Court ratified a three year earlier temporary prohibition of the gang called Loyal to Familia (LTF) in September 2021¹⁰. This was a court case concerning § 78 in the Danish constitution, which protect the right for everybody to form an association in any legal purpose. It was stated that it was a common element of LTF’s activities to commit comprehensive and serious crime and therefor the organisation should – and could legally – be banned (Møller 2022).

In October 2024 Satudarah MC was sentenced by the supreme court of Norway. So far, this is the only gang banned according to the law on criminal associations, the penal law §199 *Penalty for participation, etc., in a prohibited criminal association*¹¹. Many of the members have now joined Comanches MC.

October 2025 a district court decided that Bandidos MC Denmark should be banned in Denmark. This decision was appealed to the High Court but will not be treated here until February 2028.

9. By the end of 2023 the number of gang members registered by the police was 1.257. In average per month throughout 2023 361 gang members were in prison. The Crime Preventive Council: <https://dkr.dk/ungdomskriminalitet/bander/bander-i-tal>.

10. U2021.4999H

11. §199 was introduced in the penal law in 2021.



The fear-particularly regarding very young boys, who are often cynically recruited via digital platforms to commit crimes (phenomena referred to by the decidedly unglamorous terms CaaS and VaaS) and the dread of escalating gang warfare and internal violence (often described as “Swedish conditions”) have contributed to a punitive turn and a policy landscape characterized largely by consensus. This at a time when crime rates in most Western countries have declined, and juvenile delinquency is at a historic low in many countries.

In practice, this policy has an unequal impact; it affects groups disproportionately based on ethnicity. It is marginalized young people-most often those with an immigrant background¹²-who are subjected to increased policing and harsher penalties.

However, this development has multiple facets. Significant investments are being made, for instance in Norway, where the justice sector is set to receive an additional NOK 800 million annually to combat criminal networks. Substantial funds are also being allocated to social services and care systems. Preventive methods are being developed and implemented, as described by Mellgren et.al. in this collection.

Last but not least, significant resources are being devoted to various programs designed to help young people leave gangs and start a new life. Research such as Stenström and Heber’s contribution in this anthology demonstrates that this is no simple matter.

There has been no lack of activity and much have been done in the field. But what do we know of the effects and outcome of these measures and initiatives? Do they make things better, worse or do they have no significant effects on the problems? The lack of research and knowledge about these questions is striking. To do “something” often seems more important than to do what actually might work. The wider social consequences are rarely questioned. This is where this issue is fresh reading!

In this special issue of Nordisk Tidsskrift for Kriminalvidenskab, we have been fortunate enough to receive contributions covering research into multiple aspects of gang activity from strategies for recruitment of gang members, via preventive measures implemented across the Nordic countries to exit programmes.

Minke, Henningsen et al. have carried out interviews among imprisoned gang members in Denmark and uncovered motivations and strategies of recruiting new members to existing gangs. They find that recruitment is closely linked to the survival of the gangs and a strategic, phased and tightly con-

12. The most criminally active young boys are familiar from a criminological perspective (Oslopolitiet 2025, Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet 2025). They are socially marginalised, have problems at school, often traumatized, exposed to violence, with an immigrant background (often from war zones), are burdened by substance abuse and mental health issues, in many cases have a family history of crime and more often than other youths hang out with others, often because of problems at home.



trolled process of identification, attraction, testing and deploying potential members to obtain organisational needs.

Valdimarsdóttir and Sigurpórsdóttir examine youth street gang (aged 13-17) involvement in Iceland by using data from the Icelandic sample of the International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD4). One of the interesting findings is that immigrant background is not significantly associated with gang involvement, whereas perceived discrimination, violent hate crime victimisation, and family strain were all associated with increased odds of gang involvement.

By analysing evidence from encrypted communication platforms in 39 Swedish court cases *Ursing* examines how homicides are planned within organised criminal groups. He finds patterns in the planning processes revealing division inside the organisations and risk minimizing strategies such as using external actors. *Ursing* concludes that the findings point to broader transformations in organised crime, increasing marketisation and specialisation of criminal activities in the Nordic region.

Unlawful influencing public officials by different means such as threats, violence or attempted corruption is reported to be an increasingly experienced element of organised crime in the Nordic countries. This is the set off for three Finnish researchers, *Villman, Kaakinen and Nuotio*. The study of court verdicts from 2013 to 2023 shows that only a small number of cases during this period involved offenders linked to organised crime. However, emerging trends suggest that such influences may be on the rise and hard to detect. The authors claim that there is a need to strengthen awareness and improve detection of this kind of crime.

Four researchers from Sweden, *Mellgren and Ivert* respectively Denmark, *Johansen and Fynbo* compare experiences in working with the violence-reduction strategy "Group Violence Intervention" (GVI) in Denmark and Sweden. GVI is specifically designed to address gang violence and has mainly been used in the US. The experiences from the two Nordic countries show that differences in the socio-legal contexts in Denmark and Sweden led to striking differences in how GVI could be brought into play. This is very important knowledge for practitioners and politicians, when looking for new inspiration.

Stenström and Heber analyse the Swedish exit program. Through the lens of a new concept which they name administrative desistance, the authors identify a systematic reorganisation of crime governance in the Swedish program. In the article they show how exit from criminal gangs is shaped through administrative processes that not only enable but at the same time constrain individuals' exit from organised crime.

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