

Organised crime and intimidating behaviour towards public officials in Finland

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Abstract

Intimidating behaviour towards public officials, aimed at influencing how they carry out their duties, is an increasingly recognised facet of organised crime in the Nordic countries. Reports from across the region document unlawful influence targeting public officials, ranging from threats and violence to attempted corruption. However, the extent to which such influence is systematically driven by organised crime is not sufficiently understood. This exploratory study examines the involvement of organised crime in offences against public officials in Finland by analysing district court and court of appeal verdicts from 2013 to 2023. The findings show that only a small number of cases during this period involved offenders confirmed to be linked to organised crime. At the same time, threats directed at public officials that invoke or capitalise on the perceived danger of organised crime are more common. Although offences against public officials in Finland are rarely linked to organised crime, emerging trends suggest that such influences may be on the rise and harder to detect. This highlights the need to strengthen awareness and improve detection capacity within public administration and the criminal justice system.

Hotfullt beteende som riktas mot offentliga tjänstemän i syfte att påverka hur de utför sina arbetsuppgifter har blivit en alltmer uppmärksammas del av den organiserade brottsligheten i de nordiska länderna. Från samtliga nordiska länder rapporteras om otillåten påverkan riktad mot tjänstemän, från hot och våld till korruptionsförsök. I vilken utsträckning denna påverkan systematiskt drivs av organiserad brottslighet är dock oklart. Denna utforskande studie analyserar organiserad brottslighets inblandning i brott mot tjänstemän i Finland genom en genomgång av domar från tingsrätter och hovrätter under perioden 2013-2023. Resultaten visar att endast ett begränsat antal fall under denna period rörde gärningspersoner med bekräftade kopplingar till organiserad brottslighet. Samtidigt

var hot mot tjänstemän som anspelar på eller utnyttjar den upplevda faran med organiserad brottslighet vanligare. Även om brott mot tjänstemän i Finland sällan kan kopplas till organiserad brottslighet, finns det tendenser på att sådan påverkan kan bli vanligare och svårare att upptäcka. Detta understryker behovet av ökad medvetenhet och stärkt upptäcktsförmåga inom såväl den offentliga förvaltningen som rättsväsendet.

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Key words

Organised crime, unlawful influence, undue influence, criminal governance, public officials

Introduction

When public officials are threatened, harassed or subjected to violence because of their official role, such acts constitute more than workplace violence. These acts may also be understood as deliberate attempts to influence or steer officials in the exercise of their duties, pressuring them to neglect their responsibilities or to perform them improperly (Brå, 2016b, 2025; Finnish Government, 2025). In the Nordic countries, the term “unlawful influence” has come to be used as an umbrella concept for these behaviours, encompassing harassment, threats, violence, vandalism, improper inducements, inappropriate relationships and other forms of attempted corruption aimed at undermining democratically established rules (Brå, 2005, 2016b).

Across all Nordic countries, criminal law provides specific protection for public officials through the criminalisation of offences against them. In several jurisdictions, particular professions, such as police officers, prison and probation staff, customs officers, and rescue and ambulance personnel, are explicitly recognised in legislation as protected groups, justifying stricter penalties (Villman, Muttilainen, & Kaakinen, 2026). In recent years, sentencing provisions for offences against public officials have expanded in scope, and harsher penalties have been introduced in Sweden and Denmark (Justitsministeriet, 2025; Prop 2024/25:141). These developments have been driven by concerns as to how to protect public employees against violence, threats and harassment, particularly in Sweden because of the activities of criminal organisations. However, it has remained largely unclear to what extent unlawful influence targeting public officials is driven by organised crime in the Nordic countries. Organised crime is increasingly recognised to be gaining influence and destabilising societal structure for criminal purposes through infiltration and corruption (Europol, 2025; Polismyndigheten, 2025; Politiet, 2026; Rostami et al., 2026). Research on whether and how this is happening within the public sector is needed. Furthermore, research is needed across individual Nordic countries, as organised crime and patterns of unlawful influence vary substantially within the region.

The present study aims to examine the involvement of organised crime in offences against public officials in Finland. This was done by analysing district court and court of appeal verdicts against public officials on four offences from 2013 to 2023. The offences analysed primarily involve violence or threats directed at public officials. In this context, public officials refer to individuals serving in governmental or municipal roles responsible for implementing laws, policies, and public services, excluding elected political representatives. The explorative study is motivated by an interest in understanding the forms of intimidation targeting individuals in public office, as well as how courts interpret the involvement of organised crime in such cases. More broadly, the study seeks to shed light on how organised crime operates in stable democracies and welfare societies such as those of the Nordic countries. There are only few previous studies on threats against public officials in connection with organised crime in Finland (see e.g. Junninen & Aromaa, 2010; Paasonen, 2021), making this an area that warrants further investigation.

The analysed data material consists of 36 verdicts from the district court, and the analysis focuses on how courts assess and interpret organised crime in different types of cases. The article argues that even if offences against public officials in Finland are only rarely linked to organised crime, emerging trends suggest that such influences may be becoming more common and harder to detect. This highlights the need to strengthen awareness and improve detection capacity within public administration and the criminal justice system.

Governance and influence by organised crime

Criminal governance has been discerned as one of the main forms of criminal activities in which criminal organisations engages, together with the production and trading of illegal goods and services (Albanese, 2012; Campana & Varese, 2018). Criminal governance typically involves an illegal organisation using illicit means to achieve an unlawful goal (van Deuren et al., 2024), and can be applied to the acquisition of influence within organisations, in businesses and in the public sector (Campana & Varese, 2018; van Deuren et al., 2024; van Deuren et al., 2025). It includes activities such as dispute resolution, restriction of competition, labour racketeering, protection against theft and police harassment, and intimidation of lawful right-holders (Campana & Varese, 2018, pp. 1382-1384).

Criminal governance of communities has predominantly been found in areas with a significant Mafia presence (Lessing, 2021; Paoli, 2020). However, criminal governance can also be understood as a continuum (Campana et al., 2025), stretching from criminal groups that have taken over state functions to groups that have less influence but still govern communities in some way. Vigh and Sausdal (2025) have suggested the notion of para-crime for understanding the growing entanglement of legal and illegal activity. They define para-crime as “parasitically intertwined with regular and routine activity rather than running parallel or in opposition to it” (p.6). The authors outline that para-crime can

be characterised by a criminal activity that is either camouflaged as regular, capitalising on the regular or controlling the regular. Specifically for criminal governance, it is more likely to emerge in contexts where local and central government services are of lower quality and less accessible (Campana et al., 2025; Lessing, 2021).

Criminal groups vary in their willingness and ability to influence administration and politics (Campana et al., 2025; Gunnarson, 2023). Campana et al. (2025), studying gangs in London, conclude that only a fraction of fear-inducing groups manages to evolve into more complex organisations engaged in criminal governance beyond illicit markets. According to a Dutch study, outlaw motorcycle gangs in the Netherlands have remained relatively powerless as criminal organisations; they do not control local legal or illegal markets, nor do they exert improper influence in politics (van Deuren et al., 2025). Rather, outlaw motorcycle gangs have been described as generally avoiding attempts to exercise political power (van Deuren et al., 2025) and, consequently, as being reluctant to use violence or engage in other clearly criminalised acts against public officials (Brå, 2016a, 2016b). In Finland, where outlaw motorcycle gangs have been prominent, this could suggest a relatively modest level of violence and threats against public officials associated with these groups.

While the extent of criminal governance is likely to be rather limited in the Nordic countries, concern has grown in recent years over the influence exerted by organised crime on public officials in the exercise of their official duties (Junninen, 2025; Regeringskansliet, 2024; Villman, Mutttilainen, & Kaakinen, 2026). The evolution of organised criminal networks' reported attempts to gain influence within legal and state institutions has contributed to increased attention to this issue. The term *unlawful influence* has been used, especially in Sweden, to encompass a broad spectrum of ways in which public officials are influenced in the exercise of their official duties, including by actors linked to organised crime (Brå, 2016b, 2025). In Sweden, it has been reported that unlawful influence from organised crime is targeting a broadening spectrum of public officials (Brå, 2016b, 2025; Riksrevisionen, 2022)

Unlawful influence from organised crime encompasses both overt coercion and softer, more subtle forms of influence (Brå, 2016b, 2025c; NOU 2020:4; Riksrevisionen, 2022). The latter methods often involve strategic awareness of legal boundaries, disruption and personal targeting (Brå, 2016b; Paasonen, 2021). Influence can occur either through actions that are illegal (*unlawful influence*), such as threats and violence, or through actions that are merely improper (*undue influence*), such as subtle forms of pressure (Brå, 2016b). Because these attempts are not necessarily illegal, they are rarely reported to the police and are therefore not addressed within the justice system (Brå, 2025).

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The intimidation capital of organised crime

A defining feature of unlawful influence by organised crime is its capacity for violence or its intimidation capital. This means that criminal networks can employ subtle methods that do not involve explicit threats or direct violence but are still perceived as serious (Brå, 2025; NOU 2020:4). Intimidation capital can be attributed to a person, group, subculture, or area (Brå, 2016a). A violent reputation reduces the necessity of deploying threats (Campana & Varese, 2013): “authority is exercised through the threat of violence rather than its actual use” (Campana & Varese, 2018, p. 1383).

According to an estimation by Europol (2024), two thirds of European criminal networks use violence and intimidation in their criminal activities. Factors identified as contributing to the development of intimidation capital include myths, previous acts of violence, reputation-building crimes, and attention from the media and authorities (Brå, 2016a, p. 40). Actual links to organised crime can be difficult for both researchers and courts to establish when assessing perceived intimidation.

The relationship between affected public officials and individuals involved in organised crime can moreover take many forms. One specific form of unlawful influence operates through insiders, infiltrators or enablers. In such cases, the public officials may be both victims and active participants in criminal activities. These individuals use their profession or the facilities, vehicles or authority of their employer or client to assist individuals involved in organised crime (Brå, 2024). The connections between criminal actors and public officials may hence be direct or indirect, involving intermediaries and forming complex “networks of illegal exchanges” (della Porta & Vannucci, 2017) that can be difficult to delineate. This is consistent with how corruption risks in societies with high levels of institutional and social trust, such as the Nordic countries, are typically described: blatant bribery is uncommon, while corruption tends to take more subtle forms, such as favoritism and nepotism (Wittberg, 2023). Conceptually, unlawful influence is therefore closely linked to, and partially overlaps with, corruption (Brå, 2017).

Organised crime in Finland

Organised crime in Finland is reported to be somewhat less prevalent than in Sweden, Denmark and Norway, according to the Global Organized Crime Index (Global Organized Crime Index, 2025). Although the index describes Finland’s level of organised crime as moderate, its relative growth has been rather rapid since 2011 (ibid.; Villman, Mutttilainen, Laitinen, et al., 2026). Cyber-crime, drug-related crime and economic crime are at the centre of organised crime in Finland, and it is within these categories that the crime index has increased in recent years.

Organised crime actors active in Finland have been divided into four main groups: network-based criminality, insignia-based criminal groups, criminal groups directed from abroad and actors that facilitate criminal activity

(Jukarainen et al., 2023). Of these, the insignia-based groups, typically outlaw motorcycle criminal gangs, have long been the most dominant. Two of the most influential insignia-based groups, United Brotherhood and Cannonball MC, were dissolved by court order in 2022 and declared prohibited associations (Jukarainen et al., 2023; Junninen, 2025). Following the ban, the authorities have intervened in attempts to circumvent it, for example by bringing charges for unlawful association activities and by dissolving successor brands of banned organisations (Paasonen, 2026). At least, the visible activities of these groups are reported to have diminished in recent years, although they are believed to continue their criminal activities underground (Junninen, 2025; Villman, Mutttilainen, Laitinen, et al., 2026).

According to the Finnish police, organised crime in Finland is undergoing a transformation, with criminal networks emerging as a broader framework that encompasses not only traditional outlaw motorcycle gangs, but also newer street gangs, clan-based crime, criminal organisations and alliances, as well as their facilitators and enablers (Poliisi, 2026). However, the number of known organised crime actors in Finland has not changed significantly in recent years. The police estimate that 90-100 identified organised crime groups operate in Finland, with a total of approximately 1,000 members (Jukarainen et al., 2023; Poliisi, 2026).

In recent years, Finnish authorities have highlighted the increasing internationalisation of organised crime in Finland (Poliisi, 2026; Tulli, 2026). Organised crime is more often committed by foreign nationals; criminal networks operating in Finland are increasingly directed from abroad, and they involve a broader range of nationalities. Such internationalisation has been observed in drug crime, which has seen an increase in the number of foreign criminal actors and the diversification of nationalities. In particular, the entry of Swedish criminal networks into the Finnish drug market has increased the level of violent crime. Despite the emergence of more recent phenomena of organised crime, such as the recruitment of children, violence-as-a-service, and violence-oriented online communities (see Villman, Mutttilainen, Laitinen, et al., 2026), their prevalence in Finland remains moderate compared with Sweden.

In a recent Finnish survey directed at authorities, organisations, companies and other key actors whose work or operating environments may involve encounters with organised crime, respondents were asked an open-ended question about the most significant threats posed by organised crime (Villman, Mutttilainen, Laitinen, et al., 2026). The answers frequently mentioned the potential of organised crime to embed itself in societal structures and exploit legitimate activities. Respondents mentioned, among other things, the increasing governance capacity of organised crime, its integration into legitimate businesses and organisations, and the erosion of general trust in society and established systems. Even though this type of activity seemed to be rather limited according to the organisations in the study, they were regarded as the most serious threats.



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In the Finnish business sector, the Finnish Tax Administration argues that organised crime has established a firm foothold (Verohallinto, 2025). Based on police intelligence data, the Tax Administration has identified individuals linked to organised crime who simultaneously hold positions of responsibility in companies (Winter & Kärkkäinen, 2024). In total, there were 2,407 such companies, of which around 2,000 were operational in 2022. These companies linked to organised crime were particularly concentrated in sectors such as construction, real estate and car trade. There is limited information on the extent to which organised crime seeks to exert influence within the public sector, as systematic research is lacking.

Offences against public officials

This study focuses on four offences defined in Chapter 16 of the Finnish Criminal Code (39/1889) as offences against public officials. Table 1 presents these offences, their respective penalty scales and examples. The least severe offence, obstruction of a public official, is punishable by a fine. In cases where the insubordination is directed at a police officer, security officer or customs official, the penalty is a fine or imprisonment for up to 6 months. Resistance to a public official may also result in a fine or imprisonment for up to 6 months, whereas violent resistance carries a penalty ranging from 4 months’ to a maximum of 4 years’ imprisonment.

Table 1: Offences against public officials and their penalty scale in the Criminal Code of Finland (39-001/1889)

Offence	Violent resistance to a public official (16 ch. 1 §)	Resistance to a public official (16 ch. 2 §)	Obstructing a public official (16 ch. 3 §)	Insubordination to the police, a border guard or a customs officer (16 ch. 4, 4a, 4b§)
Penalty scale	Imprisonment for at least 4 months and at most 4 years	Fine or to imprisonment for at most 6 months	Fine	Fine or to imprisonment for at most 6 months
Example	Using or threatening to use violence to force a public official to perform or refrain from performing an official duty	Using or threatening to use violence to force a public official to perform or refrain from performing an official duty, where the threat is minor or the violence used is limited	Resisting or obstructing the performance of official duties through passive resistance, without violence or the threat of violence	Deliberately failing to comply with an order or prohibition issued by a public authority

The purpose of the provisions in Sections 1-4b of chapter 16 of the Criminal Code is to protect public officials as individuals and in the performance of their official duties (Finnish Government, 1997; Viljanen, 2023). The acts must be connected to the exercise of public authority in the performance of official duties, primarily involving resistance or opposition (Viljanen, 2023). Chapter 16

of the Criminal Code does not contain provisions addressing forms of influence directed at authorities where, for example, pressure is exerted through social media channels to influence authorities or public officials towards certain actions or to refrain from them. For instance, such intimidation of a public official could take the form of defamation. However, public officials are required to tolerate a certain level of critical public discourse due to the protection of freedom of expression. The provision in Chapter 16, Section 3 (obstructing a public official) is open to interpretation and may, in some cases, allow conduct aimed at preventing or hindering official duties to be considered punishable. There have also been proposals to criminalise targeted harassment in Finland, and even a memorandum has been prepared, but this has not led to legislative action.

The Finnish Criminal Code does not include a specific aggravating factor related to organised crime for offences against public officials, unlike the legislation in several other Nordic countries (Villman, Muttillainen, & Kaakinen, 2026). However, a connection to organised crime can be taken into account as an aggravating circumstance at the sentencing stage in Finland. In certain categories of offences – such as drug offences – this circumstance is written plainly into the definition of the offence as one of the factors that can make it aggravated, in which case a stricter sentencing scale applies (Chapter 50, Section 2). There is also a separate provision on participation in the activities of an organised criminal group (Ch. 17, Section 1a). A more general sentencing aggravation for organised crime can be applied if an offence is committed as part of the activities of a criminal group (Chapter 6, Section 5(2)). Here, an organised criminal group means a structured group, established for a certain period, consisting of at least three persons who act in concert to commit offences for which the prescribed maximum penalty is imprisonment of at least four years. The aggravating factor can also be applied to less serious offences, as long as the criteria for organised crime are met – that is, the group is organised for the purpose of committing serious crimes and the offences are committed as part of this activity.

Looking at the development of offences against public officials in Finland over the past decade, increases in reported crime can be observed across all categories, except obstruction of public officials (see Figure 1). The most pronounced and consistent rise concerns the most serious offences targeting public officials, such as violent resistance. These offences increased from 505 cases in 2013 to 957 cases in 2024. The statistics reflect overall trends in reported offences against public officials but do not indicate the extent to which organised crime is involved. For this, we turn to an examination of court decisions.

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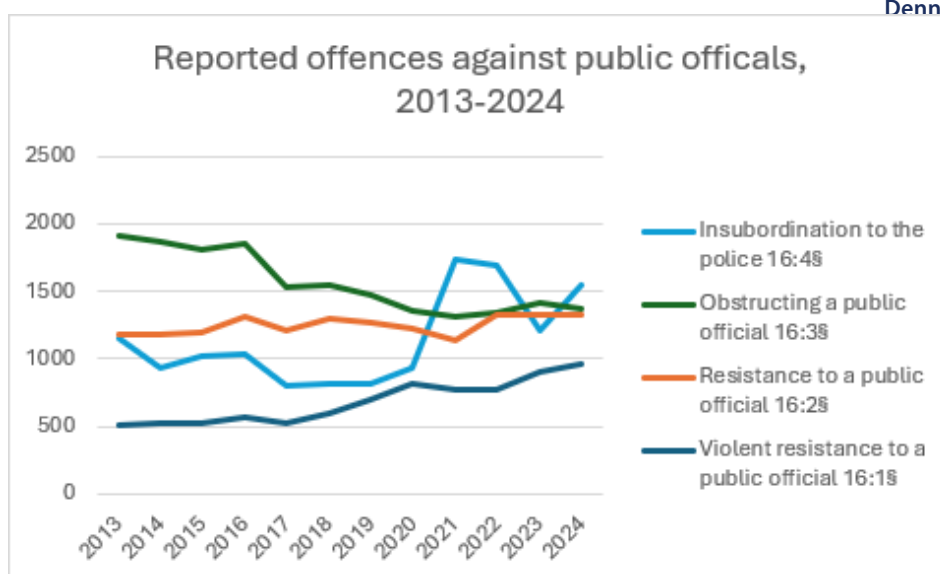


Figure 1. Reported offences against public officials in Finland between 2013 and 2024. Source: Statistics Finland (2025)

Methods

Data for analysis were gathered from a sentencing database maintained by the Institute of Criminology and Legal Policy at the University of Helsinki. The database includes full-text court decisions from Finnish district courts and courts of appeal. For this analysis, we extracted a sample of verdicts of offences against public officials given in district courts and courts of appeal between 2013 and 2023 from the database. Verdicts from 2023 were the newest data available at the time of the analysis. The sampling used a keyword search in which verdicts with specified keywords connected to organised crime mentioned were included in the analysis (see Table 2). The sampling targeted 255 verdicts of four offences against public officials: obstruction of, resistance to, and violent resistance to a public official, as well as insubordination to the police, border guard or customs officer. Verdicts from the courts of appeal were later excluded in the analysis, as none of the proceedings in the courts of appeal changed the sentence or discussed the theme of interest.

Table 2. Process schema for the inclusion of court cases in the analysis

Inclusion criteria	
Offence type (Chapter 16 of the Penal Code)	Violent resistance to a public official (§1) Resistance to a public official (§2) Obstructing a public official (§3) Insubordination to the police, a border guard or a customs officer (§4, §4a and §4b)
Keywords (translated into Finnish and Swedish)	Organised crime Gang Criminal network Criminal group United Brotherhood Hells Angels Outlaws Bandidos Cannonball Shark rider Satudarah
Total of verdicts	n=255
Included verdicts	n=36

In the initial coding, relevant verdicts were distinguished from the non-relevant. Non-relevant verdicts were those in which some of the keywords were mentioned but had no actual relevance to the events examined in the case. A total of 36 verdicts concerning offences against public officials handled in Finnish district courts between 2013 and 2023 were included. This phase also included a primarily quantitative coding of the content, such as the number of offenders and victims, profession of the victim, when the offence happened (at work or off-work), sentence type and length, and financial compensation ordered by the court. The second phase of coding included a more thorough reading of the verdicts, with qualitative coding of the content. The focus of this second phase was to analyse descriptions of the offences, the offenders' links to organised crime, the victims' experiences and the court's reasoning in sentencing, including whether and how the court considered connections to organised crime in sentencing.

In the analysis, we employed a content analytical process (see, e.g., Krippendorff, 2023), in which the quantitative data helps describe the cases while the text-based material deepens the understanding of how these cases were handled in court. Special attention was paid to how organised crime was understood and addressed by the courts. The results are presented through a general overview of the cases, followed by a more detailed analysis of

offenders' connections to organised crime and the extent to which organised crime was considered an aggravating factor in the cases examined.

Court verdicts as empirical material have several limitations. The level of detail in the verdicts can vary considerably between cases, depending on evidentiary and procedural factors. In our material, for example, there were substantial differences in the level of detail, depending on whether the offence against a public official constituted the principal offence in the case. More detailed information on the offenders' involvement in organised crime may have been available through intelligence data or pretrial investigation materials. However, such information was not accessible for this analysis; therefore, we have been limited to what is explicitly documented in the court verdicts. At the same time, it should be noted that this information constitutes the evidentiary basis of the verdicts.

Findings

Among the 36 verdicts concerning offences against public officials included in this study, two types of cases were identified: 1) offences against public officials involving links to organised crime ($n=10$), and 2) cases in which the offender made threats involving organised crime ($n=26$). The number of cases of the first type shows that criminal cases in which members of organised criminal groups commit offences against public officials are rare in Finland. On average, one case per year involving offences against public officials, linked to organised crime, has been processed in the criminal courts over the past decade.

The first group of offences included threats of violence or the use of force or violence in arrest situations or other encounters between public officials and offenders. The acts ranged in severity from disobeying orders to violent acts such as punches, shootings and the use of weapons directed at public officials. In these cases, the offenders were in some way linked to organised crime, although this link was not always confirmed by the court. Violence targeting police officers occurred occasionally and was most often directed at officers who were on duty at the time. In contrast, violence targeting prison officers appeared to be personally directed. The dataset underlying this observation is limited in size; however, it aligns with previous research on unlawful influence, which suggests that proximity and prolonged client-centred work increase the risk of such influence (Brå, 2016b).

The second group of offences, where the offender only threatened to involve organised crime, typically included cases in which the offender threatened to send a gang after the public official if they did not comply with the wishes of the offender. In these cases, it was not possible to know whether the link to organised crime was real or just a verbal expression to heighten intimidation capital, as this was seldom discussed in the verdicts.

As can be seen in Table 3, police officers were the target in the vast majority of cases. This is not surprising, as the police have repeatedly been identified as the occupation most exposed to violence (see Villman, Muttilainen, & Kaakinen, 2026; Waddington et al., 2006). In Sweden, it has been reported that, besides police personnel, social services and municipal operations in particular have increasingly become the target of influence attempts from organised crime (Prop 2024/25:141). Such a trend, at least not in the form of violent influence attempts, cannot be seen in the Finnish data where there was only one case in which a social worker was threatened with reference to organised crime during the follow-up period (Table 3). Thus, the result may reflect differences in the target profiles in Sweden and Finland or be specific to the selected offences against public officials.

Table 3. Characteristics of the analysed cases

	Threats involving OC (n=26)	Offences involving links to OC (n=10)	Total (N=36)
Type of public official			
Police	18	7	69 % (25)
Prison officer	1	2	8 % (3)
Other**	7	1	22 % (8)
Criminal verdicts*			
Violent resistance to a public official	18	5	61 % (23)
Resistance to a public official	7	2	24 % (9)
Obstructing a public official	1		3 % (1)
Insubordination to the police	1	3	11 % (4)
Context of the offence*			
While carrying out official duties	18	8	68 % (26)
Because of their official duties, not direct confrontation	6	1	18 % (7)
Off duty	4	1	13 % (5)

Note. OC = organised crime, * several categories possible, **Included the following: judge, veterinary inspector, social worker, deputy city surveyor, district bailiff and border guard

The majority of the analysed cases (63%) were adjudicated as violent resistance against a public official. This distribution does not correspond to overall crime statistics, where less serious offences are more common than violent resistance (cf. Figure 1). This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that less serious offences are less likely to result in court proceedings but also that cases linked to organised crime may be more serious than typical offences against public officials or at least more likely to be brought before the courts.

Most of the offences took place while the public official was carrying out their duties; for police officers, typically in arrest situations. Only a few instances (five) occurred during leisure time, when the official was off duty. In three of the cases, family members were explicitly included in the threat. However, in six cases, the offender stated that they would “come to his home” or “knew where he lived”, thereby encroaching on the victim’s private life. In the material, 37 of the perpetrators were men and 2 were women. In contrast, the victims’ genders were not always mentioned, as they were sometimes referred to only by their professions.

Connections to organised crime

A large majority of the analysed cases concerned outlaw motorcycle gangs. In all cases where the offenders were linked to an organised crime group, the group in question was an outlaw motorcycle gang ($n=10$). Similarly, in cases where offenders made threats involving organised crime, the majority of such threats ($n=20$) referred to outlaw motorcycle gangs. The remaining threats referred to unspecified gangs or organised criminal groups in general ($n=6$). This pattern might partly be explained by the search terms used in the data collection, which resulted in the wide representation of insignia-based groups. However, the search terms were not limited to insignia-based groups, as they also included broader concepts such as gang or criminal network. Our findings are also in line with earlier studies, noting that criminal groups with visible identifiers have historically been the most prominent and visible operators in serious and organised crime in Finland, whereas the activities of more complex networks are more hidden (Jukarainen et al., 2023).

In the material, we identified three types of connections to organised crime. First, there were individuals ($n=24$) who threatened others with organised crime but without any documentation supporting their actual links to organised crime. These threats ranged from general statements (“I will send people I know from Hells Angels after you”) to threats that explicitly referenced their belonging to a gang (e.g. emphasising that the threat is coming from Cannonball). Second, there were cases in which the individuals involved were known and confirmed by the court to be active members of an organised criminal group ($n=5$). In all of these instances, the groups were outlaw motorcycle gangs. Third, the remaining cases ($n=7$) fell somewhere in between: the individuals were not proven to be members of an organised criminal group, but there was evidence suggesting such a connection. Examples include wearing a vest with gang insignia at the time of the offence, committing the offence in connection to a gang clubhouse, or witness opinion.

Organised crime as an aggravating factor

In only 5 of the 36 cases did the court attach significance to the involvement of organised crime in relation to the offence against a public official. The potential role of organised crime as an aggravating factor, as well as the

application of sentencing aggravation for membership in an organised criminal group or for committing an offence as part of such a group, was discussed in six additional cases, but then only in relation to charges other than the offence against a public official.

The sentencing aggravation related to organised crime was applied in two cases involving offences against public officials. Both cases concerned prison officers, where the offenders specifically targeted the victims (public officials). The courts found that the intent was linked to the criminal organisation and that the victims were not randomly selected.

However, it is interesting to note that there were some less serious cases of offences against public officials (i.e. not violent resistance and with a sentencing range below four years' imprisonment) in which organised crime could have been considered an aggravating factor but sentencing aggravation was not discussed. For example, in one case, a narcotics offence constituted the principal charge, while insubordination to the police was a secondary charge. The sentencing aggravation requested by the prosecutor was applied only to the narcotics offence. The court justified the application of the sentencing aggravating to the narcotics offence as follows:

The offence in question [a narcotics offence] falls within the core activities of the criminal group. [X] was apprehended after leaving the address where the clubhouse is located. (...) Given the value of the narcotics, as well as the previously described rules and hierarchy of the criminal group, the District Court considers it rather unlikely that [X], as a member of the group, would have been able to commit the offence independently for personal gain. No circumstances have emerged in the case suggesting that he acted on his own behalf. On the above grounds, the District Court finds that the offence in question was committed as part of the activities of an organised criminal group.

Insubordination to the police in this case bordered on the fact that the defendant did not comply with police officers' orders and resisted the seizure of his phone, ultimately throwing it to the ground and stepping on it. In this case, the court did not consider the intent to be insubordinate to the police and thereby destroy evidence as also serving the interests of the organised criminal group, even though the offence was otherwise found to be sufficiently connected to organised crime.

In cases where the offender made threats involving organised crime, neither organised crime nor the credibility of these threats was discussed in the verdicts as often as might be expected. In one of the few cases involving threats linked to organised crime in which the role of organised crime was explicitly discussed, the court held that such threats cannot be considered less serious than if the person had threatened to carry out the act themselves. Instead, they should be regarded as threats of violence but not as *more* serious than a direct threat to carry out the act personally:

The district court therefore finds that, in this case, threatening with a motorcycle gang also constitutes a threat of violence, since the defendant specifically implied that,

through their [family member], they would be able to have a motorcycle gang act in the manner they desired.

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In another case, the court concluded that threatening someone by invoking an outlaw motorcycle gang is comparable to threatening with physical violence:

The district court considers that even referring to a motorcycle club and their coming to the location constitutes an implication of physical violence and is likely to create in [the victim] the impression that they will be subjected to violence.

Apart from these few examples, the overall finding was that organised crime was explicitly discussed by the court in very few cases.

Discussion

Finnish authorities have recently devoted increased attention to the threat of unlawful influence by organised crime (Junninen, 2025; Prison and Probation Service of Finland, 2026). However, little is known about the prevalence of such activities in Finland. Based on our analysis of court verdicts on offences against public officials from 2013 to 2023, such cases are relatively rare in the Finnish court system. Of the 36 analysed verdicts concerning offences against public officials, only 10 involved offences with links to organised crime. The remaining cases involved offenders making threats about involving organised crime without any indication of actual links. In the vast majority of cases, both the links to and threats involving organised crime concerned outlaw motorcycle gangs, and police officers were the most common victims in both groups.

It is likely that the predominance of outlaw motorcycle gangs in Finland has influenced both the relatively low incidence and the nature of offences against public officials that are linked to organised crime, including the use of threats that draw on their intimidation capital. One might speculate that the patterns observed would have been different had the criminal networks more recently identified by the Finnish police (see Poliisi, 2026) already been present during the period studied. As noted above, a reluctance to use violence and engage in other clearly criminalised acts against public officials has been described as characteristic of outlaw motorcycle gangs (Brå, 2016a). The predominance of outlaw motorcycle gangs in Finland may, at least partly, also explain why social workers and municipal officials were targeted to such a limited extent. However, a lack of knowledge and awareness of unlawful influence among professionals in these occupations may also play a role.

In the other Nordic countries, with Denmark as a first-mover, gangs have been treated as a distinct category of offenders and subjected to exceptional legal measures, including significantly enhanced penalties (Johansen et al., 2026; Madsen, 2024). This approach has not been adopted to the same extent in Finland, either in terms of legislation or sentencing practices. In

the context of offences against public officials, there is little indication that the fear of gangs has significantly shaped sentencing outcomes in Finland. Organised crime was seldom considered in sentencing in the analysed cases. Sentencing aggravation for membership in an organised criminal group or for committing an offence as part of such a group was applied in only two cases. In both instances, the offences involved direct and unprovoked violence, and it was likely that the offenders acted on behalf of their respective outlaw motorcycle gangs. In other European countries, it has been argued that outlaw motorcycle gangs have remained relatively powerless in terms of criminal governance beyond their own organisations (van Deuren et al., 2025). The same likely applies to Finnish outlaw motorcycle gangs, which may help explain the limited evidence of their influence observed in the court verdicts.

In principle, sentencing aggravation may be applied to less serious offences in Finland, provided that the criteria for organised crime are met – namely, that the group is structured for the commission of serious offences and that the offence forms part of such activity (ch. 6 of the Criminal Code). In practice, however, the prosecutor's primary focus is on the principal offence, for example, a drug offence, and it is typically in this context that sentencing aggravation is invoked. Based on the material analysed, aggravation on the basis of organised crime does not appear to be applied in less serious cases, even where the relevant criteria are likely to be met. A more general challenge is that, in Finland, relatively few members of organised criminal groups have been convicted for offences in which sentencing aggravation has been applied and so these issues remain insufficiently explored in empirical research.

Previous research has critically noted that reducing street-based violence to gang crime constitutes an oversimplification (Hallsworth & Young, 2008). A similar logic can be applied to organised crime and unlawful influence: not all criminal activity committed by individuals involved in organised criminal networks can be classified as organised crime or criminal governance (see van Deuren et al., 2024). This also struck us in the analysis. In particular, in cases concerning violence against the police, intent linked to organised criminal activity appears to be relatively rare or very difficult to prove. In our data, there were no evident facts pointing towards criminal governance. This raises the question of how to distinguish between violence as "mere" violence and violence as influence.

At the same time, current developments in organised crime in Europe and Finland warrant attention. First, the field is increasingly characterised by more loosely connected criminal networks alongside traditional organised crime groups (Europol, 2024; Poliisi, 2026). Second, criminal governance and influence over public institutions are expected to increase (Europol, 2025). This suggests that intimidating behaviour and other forms of unlawful influence targeting public officials may become more common, while establishing clear links between such offences and organised crime may become more difficult.

These developments may further complicate the application of sentencing aggravation related to organised crime under the Finnish Criminal Code.

The small number of cases involving offences against public officials, with confirmed links to organised crime observed in our material, could indicate that a significant share of unlawful influence is either not recognised or does not meet the legal criteria for an offence. From the perspective of para-crime (Vigh & Sausdal, 2025), this can be understood as a situation in which criminal activity is so effectively camouflaged as legitimate conduct and so deeply entangled in routine practices that it becomes difficult to identify and address for those affected and for the criminal justice system.

This study has shown that offences involving threats directed at public officials that invoked or capitalised on the perceived threat of organised crime were more common than offences committed by actors actively involved in organised crime. These results show how organised crime's reputation and intimidation capital can be used by criminal organisations and other actors in exerting unlawful influence on public officials. Attention from the media and authorities may also contribute to strengthening the intimidation capital of criminal organisations (Brå, 2016). If people frequently invoke connections to outlaw motorcycle gangs in conflicts, this may lead the police to perceive these groups as more active than they actually are, potentially further strengthening their intimidation capital. In the court cases where organised crime was used primarily as a means of intimidation, the subject was almost never explicitly discussed in the verdicts. In our view, this points to a need for a deeper understanding of what it means to threaten officials with organised crime. This is because threatening behaviour is a central operational method and form of exercising authority within organised crime, often more important than the actual use of physical violence (Campana & Varese, 2018). Therefore, it would be desirable for the justice system to be able to recognise threats linked to organised crime and not only cases that result in physical violence.

How the criminal justice system, including the courts, recognises and understands organised crime and its connections with public officials remains a challenge. The forms of organised crime that this study has been able to identify are those associated with more readily identifiable organised criminal groups, as defined under Finnish law. This likely also reflects a broader tendency within the criminal justice system. More subtle or indirect forms of influence and corrupt practices, involving intermediaries and complex networks, may therefore remain largely invisible. This poses a problem both for research and for the criminal justice system.

Several other reservations must be made regarding these findings. The most recent of our analysed cases dates back to 2022, and the field of organised crime in Finland is evolving rapidly (Villman, Mutttilainen, Laitinen, et al., 2026). As a result, recent developments may not be captured in this analysis. Moreover, unlawful influence is not a specific criminal offence itself; rather, it is often prosecuted under several different offences besides offences

against public officials, such as corruption, unlawful threats, defamation or intimidation of witnesses in judicial proceedings. Consequently, the present study captures only a subset of relevant cases of unlawful influence. Finally, and most importantly, a substantial share of unlawful influence that takes place is likely never reported to the police. Previous research indicates that such conduct often goes undetected or unreported for various reasons (Brå, 2025; Riksrevisionen, 2022). Furthermore, only a proportion of reported cases ultimately proceed to court. Thus, while an analysis of court cases can shed light on the influence manifested by organised crime through illegal acts (unlawful influence), the influence exercised through actions that are merely improper (undue influence) needs to be examined using other types of data (Brå, 2016b).

This analysis sheds light on one of the key challenges in both studying and preventing unlawful influence. Court verdicts capture the most visible and severe cases, while other, also serious, cases remain hidden to the criminal justice system. Therefore, future research should place greater emphasis on victimisation within public institutions, including how unlawful influence occurs and how such incidents are managed. Research would also benefit from closer engagement with the literature on corruption, as these fields are closely intertwined. Similarly, efforts to prevent unlawful influence and criminal governance within the public sector should prioritise detection. In addition to punitive measures, a range of preventive strategies are needed, including raising awareness, strengthening organisational practices to reduce vulnerability to unlawful influence, and ensuring that appropriate procedures, guidance and support mechanisms are in place to respond effectively when such influence occurs (Villman, Muttillainen, & Kaakinen, 2026). Nonetheless, it is important that the criminal justice system and legislation are capable of recognising and sanctioning this type of subtle criminality.

Author contributions

Author 1: Data analysis, conceptual development and drafting of the manuscript.

Author 2: Study conception and design, drafting of the manuscript, and critical revision.

Author 3: Critical revision.

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