

Ways out of Street Crime

A Comparative Study of Street Crime Desistance in
Denmark, Sweden and Norway



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Preface

This policy brief shows the key findings of the joint Nordic research project 'Ways out of Street Crime: A Comparative Study of Street Crime Desistance in Denmark, Sweden and Norway' (WOSC). The project was financed by the Nordic Research Council for Criminology. We thank the foundation for making this research possible and for support and advice during the project period.

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1 Key Findings: Ways out of Street Crime

1.1 Introduction/Background

Street crime and violence have gained renewed political and scholarly attention in the Nordic countries. Research has shown an intensification of organised crime across the Nordics, and public and political concern has grown over the spread of severe gun violence, especially in Sweden. In addition, cross-border and digital forms of crime, such as “crime as a service” (where criminal services are bought and sold online), have prompted political reactions, including strengthened Nordic collaboration and increased ministerial cooperation with new kinds of actors, such as actors in the tech industry.

Recently, much attention has been paid to the recruitment of youngsters into street crime, but crime desistance, violence reduction and dissolving criminal networks have also been a focus. Despite political debates, little scholarly attention has been paid to the mechanisms that can pull individuals out of street crime, both at the level of everyday life and at the levels of policy and practice. Consequently, we know little about the cultural logics and motivations that promote crime desistance in the Nordics, and there is a dearth of both ethnographic and comparative studies of policies, interventions and support offered by local authorities in a Nordic context. To contribute to the desistance research field, project WOSC has analysed desistance processes at the level of policy, practice and individually lived lives in Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

1.2 Context

The Nordic countries present a unique case in the study of gang desistance and anti-gang interventions. In contrast to many other parts of the world – which are seeing a state withdrawal from welfare support and prevention in deprived neighbourhoods – the Nordic welfare states continue to invest and interfere substantially in areas marked by socio-economic exclusion and crime. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, the problems with gang violence, criminal networks and street crime primarily relate to juvenile street environments in ethnically diverse and deprived neighbourhoods. However, there are significant differences in the ways national governments have responded to the problem. Compared to Sweden, Denmark and Norway experience few gun violence incidents, have a limited number of street

gangs and few gang-related killings per year. While Norway overall has maintained a traditional focus on the principles of restorative justice and rehabilitation, Denmark has promoted increasingly harsher “tough-on-crime” approaches and early, proactive and intelligence-led preventive strategies. Sweden, on the other hand, has experienced a rapid increase in gang-related shootings and homicides as well as a growing number of criminal networks over the past decade (Sturup et al., 2019). To counter this situation, the Swedish government has sought inspiration in Danish zero-tolerance politics, resulting in a hardening of Swedish anti-gang laws.

1.3 Findings

Project WOSC has revolved around three comprehensive comparative sub-studies of street crime desistance at the level of policy, practice and lived life experiences, respectively, each of which has resulted in an article (listed in the box below).

The first sub-study is a policy analysis. We conducted a document-based analysis of 15 years of policy responses to gangs and organised crime in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Beginning with Denmark’s introduction of the first Nordic anti-gang package in 2009, we traced the historical trajectories, political rationalities and intervention strategies that have shaped Nordic approaches to gangs and organised crime. The analysis identified three paradigmatic policy shifts: a post-preventive turn, a punitive turn and a turn towards cross-border crime control. We found that while these shifts have unfolded at different tempos and intensities across the three countries, they represent a regional shift away from welfare-oriented prevention towards more security-driven and internationally coordinated strategies. Overall, the study demonstrated how serious incidents, such as public shootings, have catalysed legislative expansion, intensified policing and the diffusion of carceral logics. Our concluding remarks propose that these developments challenge the traditional Nordic crime-control model and call for a renewed, globally informed perspective that balances prevention, proportionality and cross-border collaborations (Johansen, Hedlund, & Tutenges, in press).

In our second sub-study, and at the level of practice, we conducted an analysis of data material from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with 45 frontline gang exit programme staff in Sweden and Denmark. The analysis showed that gang exit programmes in Sweden and Denmark have seen an increase in gang desisters with a different profile from those originally targeted by the programmes. This group of gang desisters are predominantly young (between 15 and 30 years old), have been involved in severe violence and crime, and come from marginalised and ethnically diverse backgrounds. Many of them face complex psychological problems, such as trauma and PTSD. Our findings revealed that exit staff face significant challenges in assisting these individuals, in part because they are very young compared to the

desisters previously targeted by exit programmes and because the new generation is characterised by an unprecedentedly high level of vulnerability, needs and criminal entanglement. Exit workers find challenges in severing these gang desisters' ties from criminal networks, relocating them safely and addressing their sense of isolation and social exclusion when relocated. These findings conclude that there is a need to incorporate stronger prosocial support measures in exit interventions in order to create new opportunities for belonging and community for this group of vulnerable gang desisters (Hedlund, Johansen, & Tutenges, 2026).

Finally, in a third sub-study, and at the level of lived life experiences, the project used qualitative data from Sweden, Denmark and Norway to examine processes of entry into and exit from street crime. We found that some of the key drivers for street crime were the very same as those that facilitate desistance from it. Many criminally involved individuals are drawn to the street in the pursuit of community, thrilling violence and the high of drugs, yet the attraction of these factors is highly ambivalent and often mixed with a sense of repulsion because of the perceived treacherousness of street communities, the cruelty of street violence and the debilitating consequences of long-term substance abuse. Our findings proposed that these paradoxical attractions-repulsions of the street challenge a dominant research tradition in criminology, which distinguishes sharply between "criminogenic factors" (e.g. unemployment, low levels of self-control and having experienced childhood abuse) and "desistance factors" (e.g. employment, stable romantic relationships and strong family bonds) that either promote or prevent participation in street crime (Tutenges, Johansen, Hedlund, & Sandberg, in press).

1.4 Nordic Relevance

The rise of criminally involved groups and violence constitutes a key societal challenge in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. Comparative research, knowledge exchange and collaboration across the Nordics is vital for improving the efforts to promote harm reduction and crime desistance. This project has made an important scientific contribution to criminological research in the Nordics, showing particular challenges and dilemmas involved in gang desistance, exit programmes and crime control initiatives at the level of policy, practice and lived life experiences in the three countries. Data from our three projects has provided a unique opportunity to support authorities and policy makers in strengthening existing strategies on desistance, as well as developing new ones. Furthermore, our findings point to the need to facilitate more research on the impact of global crime developments on local street crime environments and how these challenges may also impact desistance processes and exit strategies in a future perspective.

2 Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are based on the project's main findings. For further elaboration of these findings and the comparative analysis of cases across Denmark, Sweden and Norway, please see the two published articles listed in the box below. A third article is under review, and will be added to the list of publications when accepted by journal editors.

Attention to pitfalls in policy convergence across the Nordics

The Nordic governments show an interest in strengthening their collaboration on digital and cross-border crime control through cross-country policy convergence. There are significant regional differences in care/control policy approaches, with Denmark being strong in punitive approaches, Sweden being strong in community approaches and Norway being strong in prosocial approaches. Policymakers must consider how well the national legislative frameworks undergirding these approaches will fit policy convergence among the countries (Johansen, Hedlund, & Tutenges, in press).

Attention to organisational differences

There are significant regional differences in the organisational structures around exit support services, which will significantly impact the implementation of converged policies and/or cross-border policy initiatives (Hedlund, Johansen, & Tutenges, 2026).

Continue strengthening the Nordic cross-border collaboration

There is a continuous need for strengthening the Nordic collaboration, e.g. through transnational taskforces with research experts, policymakers, government officers and practitioners working in the field of street crime control (Johansen, Hedlund, & Tutenges, in press).

Rising demand for youth-focused exit programmes in the Nordics

There are indications that the number of young individuals seeking assistance from exit programmes is increasing in the Nordics. Consequently, there is a need to develop exit support services tailored to children and young people, who require kinds of protection and social support that differ from those for older gang defectors (Hedlund, Johansen, & Tutenges, 2026).

Combatting online recruitment of children into crime

Social media and encrypted chats are used to recruit children into criminal activities. There is a desire to develop new strategies in exit work to reach these individuals. For example, social services and police can use the same platforms to send out information about available support (Hedlund, Johansen, & Tutenges, 2026).

Interventions must accord with the ambivalent nature of street crime communities

While street groups offer protection and a sense of belonging, they also breed betrayal, conflict and profound loneliness. Policies should therefore prioritise the creation of alternative communities that can offer support and community without reproducing the destructive dynamics of the street (Tutenges, Johansen, Hedlund, & Sandberg, in press).

Violence prevention strategies should be designed with an understanding of violence as both alluring and harmful

Young people (especially young men) are often drawn to the excitement, recognition and status that violence affords, even as prolonged exposure becomes psychologically and physically debilitating. Effective prevention must combine trauma-informed support with meaningful, non-criminal avenues for excitement, identity-building and peer recognition (e.g. through sports and music) (Tutenges, Johansen, Hedlund, & Sandberg, in press).

Drug policy and drug-related interventions should reflect that drugs offer both pleasure and pain

While intoxication and “fast money” are central attractions of street life, long-term drug use also leads to harm, debt and loss of dignity. Harm-reduction approaches that acknowledge this duality are essential for engaging individuals and supporting sustainable change (Tutenges, Johansen, Hedlund, & Sandberg, in press).

Desistance support must be long-term, flexible and prepared for setbacks

The pathways out of street crime are rarely linear; individuals often oscillate between attraction and repulsion in relation to the street. Policies should avoid excessive penalisation of relapse and instead offer stable, persistent support that recognises desistance as a process rather than an event (Hedlund, Johansen, & Tutenges, 2026).

Crime prevention and desistance initiatives should be coordinated across sectors

Current systems often divide youth prevention, policing, social services, employment and housing into separate silos, despite the fact that individuals move fluidly between phases of involvement and withdrawal. Integrated multi-agency strategies are necessary to address the magnetic push-pull dynamics of the street (Tutenges, Johansen, Hedlund, & Sandberg, in press).

Facts about the Research Project

Project WOSC was conducted by Senior Researcher and PI Mette-Louise E. Johansen at VIVE, Associate Professor Anna Hedlund at Gothenburg University and Professor Sébastien Tutenges at the Danish School of Education, with contributions from Professor Sveinung Sandberg at the University of Oslo.

The project period was May 2023-December 2025.

Newly published articles:

Hedlund, A., Johansen, M. L. E., & Tutenges, S. (2026). The new generation of gang desisters: Key challenges facing gang exit support structures in Sweden and Denmark. *European Journal of Criminology*, 14773708251408233.

Johansen, M. L., Hedlund, A., & Tutenges, S. (in press). Nordic policy responses to gang-related crime 2009-2025: Policy developments and future challenges in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*.

Tutenges, S., Johansen, M. L. E., Hedlund, A. & Sandberg, S. (in press). The street crime paradox: An ethnographic study of the attractions and repulsions of street culture. *British Journal of Criminology*.

Blog post:

<https://nsfk.org/2025/12/03/the-new-generation-of-gang-desisters-key-challenges-facing-gang-exit-support-structures-in-sweden-and-denmark/>

Box 2.1 Data and Methods

The project was based on a unique set of already gathered qualitative data from Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The existing data consisted of a large pool of ethnographic observations and interviews with criminally active individuals, gang defectors, police officers and social service providers in the cities of Copenhagen, Aarhus, Malmö and Oslo. Moreover, project WOSC has drawn on existing data on recent policy developments in Denmark and Sweden, using open sources such as policy documents, police reports and government inquiries. The existing data were supplemented by data collected from open-source materials consisting of national action plans, legislative acts, government evaluations and policy studies from each country.

The data material was subjected to three different strategies of comparative analysis:

Firstly, we conducted a comparative document and policy analysis (Prior, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2006), which provided a historical account and a current overview of the main anti-gang policies in Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

Secondly, we conducted a qualitative and comparative thematic analysis of interviews with police officers and social workers working in gang exit programmes in Denmark and Sweden, based on an overarching analysis of similarities and divergencies in data under different empirical themes, leading to an identification of analytical themes focusing specifically on current key challenges in exit programmes in both countries.

Thirdly, we conducted a cross-cultural comparative analysis (Melhuus, 2002) of qualitative interviews and ethnographic fieldwork material collected among individuals involved in street crime, gangs and gang desistance in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. This approach, and the extensive volume of data analysed, enabled the development of a conceptual tool, 'the street crime paradox', which facilitates the examination of pathways into and out of street crime across national contexts. The concept provides theoretical insight with direct relevance for how street crime is understood and addressed across the Nordic countries.

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