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Abstract | This paper contributes to the growing literature on organised crime prevention by examining how crime associated with outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs) is understood and approached in Scandinavia. The paper describes different understandings of the phenomenon in the form of past experiences and expected future developments. Criminal justice system responses and other innovative approaches are also outlined. The paper offers insight into the challenges associated with OMCGs, and the efforts of Scandinavian nations to prevent recruitment and encourage dissociation and desistance.

Scandinavian approaches to outlaw motorcycle gangs

Synnøve Økland Jahnsen

The Australian 'war on bikies' is known internationally for the significant policy, legislative and law enforcement effort that has been devoted to dealing with outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs). Given the ongoing concern expressed by the media and the general public, it is perhaps useful to look beyond the Australian context and consider experiences from Scandinavian states that share a history of violent conflict between competing OMCGs.

This paper offers insight into Scandinavian experiences and efforts to prevent recruitment to OMCGs and encourage dissociation and desistance, with examples of cross-departmental approaches that seek to unite both disruptive and rehabilitative responses. Both local and national responses are described. The aim is to demonstrate the coexistence of various Scandinavian approaches targeting OMCGs which rest on penal, administrative and civil powers.

Terminology

This paper refers to Scandinavian rather than Nordic countries. 'Nordic countries' usually refers to a larger geographical and cultural region of Northern Europe: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, and their associated territories (Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the Åland Islands). Although often used as a synonym for the Nordic countries, 'Scandinavia' usually refers to a smaller subset of these: the three monarchies of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. These countries share borders and a coastline, and their cultures and social and political structures have much in common.

In addition, the languages of all three countries are very similar. In this paper Iceland and Finland were excluded due to a language barrier which affects Norwegian researchers approaching Finnish or Icelandic policy fields.

'One percenters', 'outlaws', 'criminal motorcycle gangs', 'MC-criminals', 'bikers' and 'rockers' are only some of the terms used in Scandinavian public discourse about motorcycle clubs associated with serious and organised crime. While 'rockers' is used in Denmark much like the Australian term 'bikies', Norwegians and Swedish policy documents use other, and often more specific, definitions. Also, while the distinction between being a 'rocker' (OMCG) and a 'bande' (gang) might be important to their members, Danish authorities draw no clear distinctions between OMCGs and other types of gangs. This reflects the perception that these two phenomena are closely related and are therefore seen as being one and the same policy area. For practical reasons, this paper uses the most common international term—outlaw motorcycle gangs, or OMCGs.

While this label seems fitting when discussing a particular policy area, other international definitions cause more problems in a Scandinavian context. Internationally 'one percenters' commonly refers to clubs and individuals who belong to the section of the motorcycle community which are not registered with a nationwide motorcycle association, while 'outlaw' usually refers to opposition to mainstream societal norms (Wolf 2008). In a Scandinavian context, however, 'Outlaw MC', also known as the American Outlaws Association (AOA), is also the name of a particular motorcycle club that exists in Norway, Iceland and Sweden. To make definitional matters worse, there exist several Scandinavian motorcycle associations, not all of which are registered with the Federation of European Motorcyclists Associations (FEMA), which is the European equivalent of the American Motorcycle Association (AMA). For example, the Danish OMCGs Hells Angels and Bandidos motorcycle clubs are both registered with the nationwide association Biker Foundation Denmark, which is not a member of FEMA (Klement 2016: 4). In contrast, the Norwegian Automobil Union and the Norwegian Motorcycle Union (NMCU) are both members of FEMA and therefore disallow OMCGs from becoming members due to their criminal reputation, intolerance for gender equality norms and other values that the mainstream motorcycle community want to protect.

Methodology

This analysis was based on a systematic reading of selected police reports and national strategy documents, mainly from the period 2010–15. The paper broadly outlines national responses to OMCGs in Scandinavia and describes the most important features of related policies. Although all Scandinavian states prioritise the disruption of OMCG activity through domestic law enforcement and the exclusion of members of foreign OMCGs, it is only the Danish police who provide a systematic and national perspective, referred to as a 'holistic approach'. The analysis therefore relies on more general trend reports on organised crime and recommendations for OMCG-related policies provided by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (Norwegian: Kommunenes Sentralforbund, commonly known as KS) and the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Swedish: Brottsförebyggande rådet, commonly known as BRÅ).

These sources are useful when comparing the intentions behind the policies across the region, but cannot be described as exhaustive in their presentation of practices and local policies. Nor can they be seen as evidence that national policies are actually being implemented at local levels. The documents were analysed with the aim of identifying consistent representations of OMCGs in the dominant policy discourse.

This analysis builds on an extensive effort to identify relevant open-source information on the policing of OMCGs in Norway, Denmark and Sweden dating back to their first appearance in the 1980s and the policies that followed what has been referred to as the ‘Great Nordic Biker War’ during the 1990s (described later). The analysis also sought to examine contemporary Scandinavian policing activities against OMCGs and describe how they relate to other policy areas, in particular the more recent efforts to prevent gang recruitment among marginalised immigrant youths.

OMCGs in Europe and Scandinavia

While the exact number of outlaw motorcycle gangs in Europe is not known, they are present across the entire European continent. According to Europol, new OMCG chapters are increasingly being established in Europe—both new chapters of already-present OMCGs and chapters of clubs new to Europe (Europol 2010). The increase in new chapters is related to increased membership of clubs like the Hells Angels, Bandidos, Outlaws and Gremium. In addition, Europol report the establishment and growth of newer groups—such as the Satudarah Maluku and the Blue Angels in north-west Europe—and the arrival of new OMCGs from Australia (eg the Comancheros and the Rebels), Canada (eg Rock Machine) and the USA (eg the Mongols and the Vagos). The main driver behind this expansion is believed to be a desire to expand their role in particular illegal markets—especially across north- and south-east Europe, where access to the Balkan route increases their capacity to engage in drug trafficking (Europol 2010). Europol fear the expansion will lead to violent clashes and have a negative impact on the organised crime situation in Europe (Europol 2012).

For many, the conflicts that erupted between OMCGs across Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland in the 1990s serve as a reminder of both the violent consequences of an increased concentration of OMCGs and their propensity for extreme violence. The conflict took place in highly public places and involved the use of bombs, grenades, automatic weapons and anti-tank grenades (stolen from an unknown number of military weapon storage facilities). In total, 11 people were killed during the conflict, and 96 wounded. Most of the victims were members or prospective members of an OMCG, but one civilian was killed and 20 injured, most of them by explosives.

Many causes of what was later termed the ‘Great Nordic Biker War’ have been theorised (Larsson 2016), yet no certain cause has been determined, partly because many of the reported incidents remain unsolved criminal cases and it is assumed that much of the violence was never reported to the police. However, according to the Danish police, the conflict arose as a result of competition between the Hells Angels and the Bandidos over new members and access to drug markets, where the Danish chapters were seen as the driving forces behind the conflict, and also responsible for its resolution:

In September 1997, the Hells Angels and Bandidos held a press conference in Denmark, where they stated that the clubs had reached an agreement to cease all violence between the Hells Angels and Bandidos. The clubs also agreed that they would not expand their presence in the Nordic countries by creating new chapters. (Rigspolitiet 2009: 10; author's translation)

The absence of violent conflict between the competing clubs is not necessarily interpreted as a sign of peace or that the clubs tolerate each other. The Norwegian police, for example, describe the existence of a defined front, with the Hells Angels and Coffin Cheaters allied on one side, and the Bandidos and Outlaws allied on the other. According to the Norwegian police:

Since 2000, the clubs have been fighting a cold war to gain the largest possible expansion of both territory and number of members/supporters. (Politidirektoratet 2010: 14; author's translation)

The Hells Angels is known as the oldest and most organised motorcycle club with a relatively stable group of members, while the Bandidos, Outlaws and other OMCGs are described as less hierarchical and more fragmented. Behind the frontline, there appears to be confusion, breaches of alliances, and pragmatic solutions—for example, Hells Angels members transfer to the Bandidos and vice versa. The Swedish police report similar developments and point towards a changing club culture and a high turnover of members and prospective recruits. In recent years criminals have moved from one organisation to the other, something that was previously almost unthinkable to the Swedish Police. They comment:

Membership in HAMC [Hells Angels Motorcycle Club] was meant for life. That is not the case in the current situation and movement within the MC environment is higher today than previously. (Polismyndigheten 2015: 16; author's translation)

These descriptions of a fragmented and continually shifting social landscape not only shed light on the changing nature of OMCGs but also point to the challenges faced by the police in their efforts to monitor the development of OMCGs. This might explain why Scandinavian threat reports contain more detailed information about the largest and oldest clubs, the Hells Angels and Bandidos, while it is difficult to get a clear sense of the recruitment, membership and organisation structure of smaller and newer clubs, like Satudah, Coffin Cheaters, No Surrender and Black Jackets, or how these are related to street gangs and support crews for the larger OMCGs.

The Danish gang war

The Danish gang war, which was allegedly coordinated by older Hells Angels members trafficking drugs from Morocco and Spain (Frich 2010), started in 2008 and reached its peak in 2013. According to the Danish police, there were 232 shootings and 18 deaths, and 198 people were wounded (Bjørger 2015: 130). The conflict de-escalated in 2015, returning to a more 'normal' situation with fewer violent conflicts and street fights (Rigspolitiet 2015, 2016, 2017). Allegedly the conflict began between the Hells Angels (and their support group AK81) and newer gangs like Black Cobra, the Bloods and the Blågårdsplads Group, which are all referred to as 'immigrant gangs'. Not long after the conflict started Jørn Jønke Nielsen, a prominent Hells Angels spokesperson, published the *Sjokol Manifesto*, which can be read as both an expression of anti-immigrant and racist sentiments and an attempt to publicly draw a distinction between the Hells Angels' more 'honourable' biker culture and that of ethnic-based gangs. In the manifesto, Nielsen describes those he despises as jackals: 'Jackals are found mainly among people of Arab origin, anything else would be wrong to say...Most jackals are Muslims' (Nielsen 2008: 1).

In response to the Danish conflicts, police targeted and imprisoned individuals seen to be leaders and driving forces within street gangs and OMCGs (Rigspolitiet 2013). Although the Bandidos were not originally involved in the conflict between Hells Angels and migrant gangs in the Copenhagen area, a lack of clear leadership led to internal conflicts between Bandidos members which resulted in the formation of a new chapter called Westside Nation. Westside Nation was closely related to the immigrant community and gave rise to a number of ongoing conflicts with the Bandidos. It is not entirely clear whether Westside Nation is seen as an OMCG or an 'immigrant gang', as it seems to be a bit of both. As such, the group is caught in the middle of a conflict with many layers, at both a practical and a political level.

It is not clear why there have been no similar conflicts in Sweden, which also faces serious challenges related to structural racism, large populations of marginalised immigrant youths and a growing gang problem. In Norway the conflict between ethnic gangs seems to be a distant problem, and we find examples of cooperation between gang members and OMCG members in Norway (KRÅD 2012). In part this too, like in Denmark, can be seen as mirroring social structures, but in this case in a society that enjoys less ethnic tension compared to its neighbouring countries.

Recruitment

Research by the Danish Ministry of Justice and national police has shown that OMCG recruitment shares several characteristics with recruitment to other types of gangs (Klement & Kyvsgaard 2014; Klement, Kyvsgaard & Pedersen 2010; Pedersen 2014a; Pedersen 2014b). Although there are important distinctions between OMCG culture and other gang cultures, Danish researchers have pointed out that both OMCGs and other gangs usually have a higher turnover of persons than might be expected (Klement & Kyvsgaard 2014). Not only do gang members actively recruit new members, but members are also recruited through close-knit relationships (eg older brothers or other family members, friends or members of an extended social circle). In addition, recruitment is influenced by a set of push factors related to socioeconomic background, schooling and family circumstances, as well as social conditioning which may have led recruits to accept deviant and criminal behaviour as normal (Klement, Kyvsgaard & Pedersen 2010; Lindstad 2012). However, Klement and Kyvsgaard (2014) found that members of motorcycle gangs were likely to come from less-deprived social backgrounds, were older, better educated, more likely to be employed and likely to have a better income compared to members of other types of gangs. This is because, while most members of OMCGs are Danish citizens and of Danish ethnic origin, other gangs have a more diverse ethnic or multicultural background. As such the identity markers of OMCGs reflect general traits of Danish society, rather than risk factors in themselves (Klement & Kyvsgaard 2014).

However, it should also be mentioned that OMCGs in Norway might not have the capacity to recruit new members, as illustrated by this quote from the Oslo police:

Age and persistent drug abuse are among the contributing factors that cause clubs in Oslo to continuously 'lose' members. Clubs in the capital city currently recruit few or no members from Oslo. Their appeal is small, especially among the youth. (Oslo Politidistrikt 2012: 39; author's translation)

Although neither the Hells Angels nor Bandidos seem to be able to recruit in Oslo, they have successfully done so in other police districts in Norway. In 2010, Norwegian authorities reported an increase in the number of supporter crews seeking to recruit youth in smaller Norwegian cities like Trondheim and Kristiansand (Support X-Team and Mexican Teamwork for the Bandidos MC, AK81 and Red & White for the Hells Angels, and the Black & White Crew for the Outlaws). This might reflect cultural distinctions between youth growing up in the capital city and those growing up in rural areas, where multiculturalism has a weaker position and biker culture and OMCGs seem to have more appeal.

Violent and criminal organisations

Literature on OMCGs in Scandinavia is scarce, and only a handful of projects have sought to draw any conclusions about whether violence and crime are a major or normal aspect of OMCG membership. Christian Klement's (2016) analysis of Danish intelligence data provides an insight into the nature of these groups and their relationship to other street gangs. To some extent, Klement's research supports the notion that members of OMCGs frequently offend and are convicted (see, for example, Brottsförebyggande rådet 1999). He concludes that 'Affiliation with [an OMCG] facilitates criminal behaviour' (Klement 2016: 111). However, this is not necessarily true when measuring violence and comparing the levels with control groups—in this case, members of street gangs. Violence seems to be a group phenomenon in both cases, in the sense that its frequency changes with known conflict between gangs. Where there is known conflict between gangs, all gang members, not only OMCG members, are more likely to commit violent acts that will be reported by, or to, the police. Klement's research can be interpreted as supporting the idea that violence occurs in the context of territorial disputes between different OMCGs, as well as because of rivalries with local criminal groups and street gangs.

Police statistical data can be used to measure crime committed by OMCGs; however, there are a number of methodological challenges associated with this. For example, a significant proportion of violence and intimidation is not reported to police and is therefore not available for statistical analysis. Police data are, arguably, unsuitable for measuring the incidence of intimidation and threats of violence, or for understanding how intimidation is used to discipline and exert control over group members, because they under-represent levels of crime and intimidation.

There is also the danger of over-representing crime because police data are primarily retained for administrative, rather than research, purposes. The Danish police have, since 2011, aimed to meet targets for the number of OMCG and other gang members incarcerated. It seems likely that the application of a performance indicator for incarcerations and associated clear-up rates would influence both the surveillance of OMCGs and the quantity and quality of any form of monitoring—and thus also the scientific grounds for measuring OMCGs' criminal activity.

As noted above, Scandinavian police appear to have more detailed knowledge about Hells Angels members than members of the Bandidos or Outlaws, or the smaller and more newly established clubs, partly because there is more movement and a higher turnover of members in these smaller clubs. A challenge associated with the quality and use of intelligence data is that selection bias might be influenced by what the Norwegian police researcher Liv Finstad called 'the police gaze', which describes a particular way of ordering and responding to the social world (Finstad 2000).

In this case researchers are not able to control which motorcycle clubs are listed as OMCGs and therefore monitored, and which ones are not. Therefore, it is difficult to draw distinctions between what it means to be part of, or associated with, a social network, a gang or a criminal organisation.

The fight against organised crime

The Nordic states—Iceland, Finland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway—share a longstanding tradition of police cooperation, which began as an informal ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ between their ministers (Hufnagel 2013). In addition to the Nordic Police and Customs Cooperation collaboration, numerous international projects and groups have been set up as part of transnational efforts to prevent recruitment to OMCGs and prosecute OMCG-related crimes. The most noteworthy of these transnational initiatives are Europol’s intelligence-gathering Project Monitor, and the International Outlaw Motorcycle Gang Investigators Association (IOMGIA), a worldwide association that organises an annual training conference. All the Nordic states are members of these international initiatives, and as such Nordic police intelligence and expertise on OMCGs can be seen as a vital part of a global alliance against organised crime and criminal organisations.

While all Scandinavian states have signed international agreements seeking to harmonise global responses, neither Sweden nor Denmark has defined the term ‘organised crime’ in its domestic laws. Instead both Swedish and Danish police use the Europol definition of organised crime to define OMCGs in their strategy documents. The Norwegian penal law definition of organised crime was implemented in 2003, and aligns with the European definition by defining a criminal organisation as ‘a structured association, established over a period of time, of more than two persons acting in concert with a view to committing offences which are punishable by deprivation of liberty or a detention order of a maximum of at least four years or a more serious penalty, to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit’ (Official Journal of the European Union 2008: 43). This law allowed the court to increase penalties for organised crime; it is similar to a pre-existing Danish ban on gangs, which also allows for heavier sentencing if a crime is proved to be gang-related.

The Norwegian police did not succeed in convicting a member of the Hells Angels for organised crime until 2014. Yet defining OMCGs as organised crime has been important for the Norwegian police, as it has opened up a broader set of police methods and strategies, such as surveillance and use of informants, which are commonly referred to as ‘secret methods’. In addition to the penal law, traffic legislation, arms legislation, and passport and ID controls all provide opportunities to disrupt or disallow particular OMCG-related activities. For example, although the Schengen agreement provides all EU citizens the freedom to travel and live independently of their original citizenship, Norwegian authorities practise a form of zero tolerance where foreign citizens are not allowed to enter Norway to participate in OMCG activities or meetings (Politidirektoratet 2014). This practice can be dated back to the late 1990s, but is increasingly being used in order to deny entry for members of OMCGs to other Nordic states (see, for example, Overseas Security Advisory Council 2014; *Jan Anfinn Wahl v the Icelandic State*, EFTA Court, Luxembourg, 22 July 2013).

None of the Scandinavian states has taken legal steps to dissolve OMCGs. The Danish government attempted to ban OMCGs in 1998 and again in 2010, but failed on both occasions. These attempts failed because the ban was seen as unconstitutional, and this can be understood as part of a legal tradition that refrains from implementing laws relating to specific organisations or persons. The sections below describe legal responses to OMCGs which, as a general rule, rest on a combination of punitive, administrative and civil powers.

The local governance model (Norway)

The *Handbook for preventing and fighting crime from one percenters and criminal motorcycle gangs* (Politidirektoratet 2014; author's translation) outlines Norway's anti-OMCG strategy and defines the actors involved and their legal powers. The Norwegian handbook is similar in many ways to the Swedish *Handbook against local organised crime* (Brottsförebyggande rådet 2010), which focuses on creating a united front against the expansion of OMCGs by encouraging cooperation between local and national authorities. Local businesses, schools, social security departments, child welfare services, fire brigades and construction and land-use planning departments are some of the organisations and public services that are expected to unify and coordinate their efforts to combat OMCGs in concert with the police, tax authorities, customs agencies, vehicle registration offices and welfare services.

In essence the Norwegian handbook describes a multi-agency approach which makes a range of legal tools available. Municipal interventions available through planning and building regulations, alcohol legislation, catering regulations, electrical legislation, acquisition regulations and others can all be used to ban the wearing of visible patches. While there is no general ban on wearing patches, Norwegian law allows private actors, such as restaurateurs and bar owners, to deny patched OMCG members entrance to their premises. If a bar owner refuses to cooperate with police, the municipal authorities have the power to revoke their alcohol licence; the handbook suggests that police and municipal authorities act in partnership to reach common goals.

Although these efforts rely in many respects on local governance, and the freedom to share intelligence across agencies, they can also be understood in relation to the political tendency within the Scandinavian countries for governments to seek more efficient strategies to fight organised crime—via third-party policing and joint task forces, as described below, as well as through other cross-institutional efforts targeting financial and organised crime at a national level (see, for example, Justitiedepartementet 2013). Yet the handbook does not address what form of local governance is needed, nor who is responsible for coordinating it, which means it is challenging to evaluate its effects.

The Al Capone model (Denmark)

The Danish police have, in many respects, been the principal drivers of a continuous effort to mobilise, coordinate and unify cross-departmental and civil society efforts to prevent gang recruitment and uncover gang-related financial crimes like extortion, tax evasion, social security fraud and the infiltration of legitimate businesses. According to annual Danish police reports (Rigspolitiet 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) the Danish police have developed a sophisticated approach to organised crime that seeks to unite short- and long-term goals (Rigspolitiet 2015).

Local police initiatives addressing OMCGs are organised under the Rigspolitiet, a nationwide police force with specialised tasks. The goal is to coordinate local and national activity in an ‘intensified and progressive’ front (Rigspolitiet 2015: 10; author’s translation). Task Force Øst (TFØ) and Task Force Vest (TFV) are interdisciplinary projects led by a steering committee, with the participation of the national police, the Prosecutor General, the Public Prosecutor in Copenhagen, the Public Prosecutor for Serious Economic and International Crime and the Police Intelligence Service (Danish: Politiets Efterretningstjeneste, commonly known as PET).

An interesting feature of the Danish strategy is the close relationship between police and tax authorities, which focuses particularly on financial crime, tax evasion and social security fraud. This cooperation is directly linked to police criminal investigations and control efforts. In addition, Danish tax authorities may initiate their own investigations under what is referred to as the ‘Al Capone model’. Here the aim is to target club members individually and minimise the flow of money into particular motorcycle clubs and gangs.

The Danish tax authorities are involved in both the local and the national strategy units, and are represented by liaison officers in the police force. Between 2009 and 2014, the Danish authorities reported 728 targeted controls and kr59.9 million in extra tax revenue (about A\$12 million). Danish authorities do not report the cost of their operations, but annually 20–38 full-time tax authority employees were involved in anti-OMCG operations between 2011 and 2014 (Rigspolitiet 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). From 2014, Danish authorities expanded their activities in particular geographical areas (Rigspolitiet 2014) as part of a national strategy called ‘A solid grip on gangs’.

‘A solid grip on gangs’ (Denmark)

The Danish authorities apparently surpass the Swedes and Norwegians in introducing laws and regulations targeting OMCGs and street gangs. The most recent policy change was implemented in July 2014 as part of a strategy called ‘A solid grip on gangs’, which targeted OMCGs, organised crime and gang-related crime (Rigspolitiet 2014; author’s translation). The background to the introduction of these laws was the violent conflict between OMCGs and street gangs, mentioned earlier, and a perception that the problem was out of control. The new legislation increased the penalties for the possession of arms and expanded opportunities to use the so-called ‘gang paragraph’ (s 81a in the penal law), which allows the court to double the penalties for specific crimes if these crimes are related to conflicts between OMCGs and gangs.

Penal and probation services were given increased powers to determine whether OMCG members should be subject to specific restrictions limiting their access to probation. These include the ability to revoke the parole of gang members who actively participate in an ongoing violent conflict. Another legislative amendment is referred to as ‘zone prohibition’. A zone prohibition allows people who have shown particularly deviant or criminal behaviour to be banned from particular areas where the potential for conflict is seen as grave—for example, banning them from being within a 500 metre radius of a particular area. It is not clear how the laws regulate the implementation of these policies or to what extent intelligence-led policing strategies restrain or allow particular forms of profiling. It seems likely that these prohibitions are used at the discretion of local police units.

Because the Danish authorities see prevention and desistance programs as useful, the ‘A solid grip on gangs’ strategy included a package of laws and strategic policy instruments that initiated several programs—joint efforts between municipal representatives and the police to shut down facilities hosting gang and OMCG activities. Examples of such strategies can also be found in Sweden and Norway, where local authorities have simply bought out an OMCG, or denied an OMCG permission to use a particular property.

Importantly, ‘A solid grip on gangs’ is closely tied to other policies that seek to prevent recruitment by criminal gangs and the radicalisation of marginalised youth in impoverished neighbourhoods (referred to as ‘ghettoisation’ in the national strategy; Regeringen 2004, 2010). The Danish police have reported that the new amendments force OMCGs to find other, non-violent solutions to their conflicting interests, and are particularly useful for resolving conflicts between street gangs and street crews in certain neighbourhoods (Rigspolitiet 2015). This assertion has not been evaluated, but is repeated in their reports following the implementation of new legislation (Rigspolitiet 2016, 2017).

There are several ways to interpret the introduction of ‘A solid grip on gangs’ in Denmark. It can be seen on one level as a response to a political climate governed by ‘tough on crime’ rhetoric, where the ‘grip’ is nothing more than a symbolic gesture seeking to demonstrate a will rather than the capacity to prevent crime. On another level the growing awareness of the harms inflicted on society by organised groups, whether they are defined as OMCGs or youth gangs, seems to have created a genuine interest in developing new forms of crime prevention strategies, and as such has created the perfect climate for police innovation. Yet from a more critical perspective, one might argue that ‘A solid grip on gangs’ is used as a technique to disband OMCGs and increase policing of marginalised communities, while avoiding controversies around constitutional issues.

A way out: Exit programs

On paper, if a person wishes to move on from a destructive or criminal past, all Scandinavian countries offer some form of public support to facilitate the transition. There are a range of initiatives aimed at increasing collaboration between local government, the police, prison services, prosecutors, tax administrators, customs agencies et cetera, organised collectively under what are usually referred to as ‘exit programs’ or ‘defector programs’ (see, for example, Brottsförebyggande rådet 2016). On paper these programs offer traditional police protection for those who fear retaliation; other programs attempt to combine protection with assistance in breaking former social ties and starting a new life. Assistance is also offered in the form of housing and labour-market integration programs, education, access to drug rehabilitation programs and different kinds of therapy. In Denmark the authorities also offer financial support to individuals wishing to remove visible gang-related tattoos. This latter assistance was part of the aforementioned legal changes and the ‘A solid grip on gangs’ national strategy (Rigspolitiet 2014).

While most of these initiatives are state funded, several were established by former OMCG members and individuals with a criminal past. A well-known example of this is the Swedish organisation EXIT, which was founded by a former neo-Nazi who wanted to motivate right-wing extremists to leave White Power, a Swedish outgrowth of the international right-wing extremist movement. In Norway and Denmark, a number of programs have been built around the provision of mentoring by former members, usually under the auspices of a larger organisation and in cooperation with public services (see, for example, Als Research 2012; Dønnestad 2008; Hansen 2007; Svennevig 2012).

In 2008, the Swedish authorities established a Knowledge Centre in Gothenburg. Here officers from different professional backgrounds work together to combat gangs, organised crime and related national issues. The Swedish police also initiated the Stockholm Gang Intervention and Prevention Project, and drafted a national strategy (Leinfelt & Rostami 2012; Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2010; Rostami 2014). In Norway, efforts to improve services through more targeted rehabilitation programs arose from concern over the growing number of right-wing extremist groups and the increase in gang-affiliated violence in immigrant communities in the 1990s (Carlsson & Haaland 2004; Carlsson 2005; Bjørge & Carlsson 1999; Bjørge, Halhjem & Knudstad 2001; Bjørge, Carlsson & Haaland 2001).

Denmark is the only country with a national strategy that more specifically aims to tailor coordinated services to the needs of former OMCG members. It is also the only country that systematically monitors these programs. In a Scandinavian context, the Danish project 'A way out' (En vej ud) is groundbreaking. Within a few years of its establishment in 2011, the program managed to recruit a steadily increasing number of people who wished to take part in an exit program. By 2013, 15 people had enrolled in the exit program, and by 2015 this number had increased to 74. Of the total 134 people who registered an exit agreement with Danish authorities, 72 had been members of an OMCG and 62 had been members of another gang (Pedersen 2015). In 2014 the project became a permanent unit of the National Crime Prevention Centre. The Danish ministry of justice has initiated several research projects to evaluate the success of the exit model.

One major finding of these research projects is that the number of people who decide to exit gangs is greater than is generally recognised and that most of the individuals who leave an OMCG are fully capable of exiting without government assistance (Klement & Kyvsgaard 2014; Pedersen 2014b). Of those who entered into an exit contract with the authorities, most had been screened by the police and were described as already having distanced themselves considerably from the OMCG and their identity as a gang member. These people appear highly motivated and report very clear ideas about what sort of help they want from the government and what they want to achieve. The dream of living a normal life and the desire for reform are reportedly the two key motivations for enrolling in an exit program (Pedersen 2014b; Pedersen 2015). Some people, however, reported that they felt pressured by the police or by other gang members. Many worried that their decision to leave the OMCG would have some sort of negative consequence, including potential attacks on family members. A third of OMCG members reported they had been forced to pay compensation to leave their club (Pedersen 2015). In addition, as many as nine in 10 of all gang members (not only OMCG members) reported that they worried that stigmatisation and police harassment would persist after they left the gang (Pedersen 2015). About six in 10 former gang members reported they were very worried they would not find a job (Pedersen 2015).

Summary and conclusion

To conclude, although there is disagreement about how to define organised crime in a Scandinavian context, it is generally not seen as systemic or embedded in the legal economy (Korsell & Larsson 2011). Both this and Scandinavia's low levels of corruption reflect one of the basic traits of the Scandinavian societies, which are known for seeking to minimise political and economic tensions through the universal nature of the welfare state (Pratt 2008). Comparatively speaking, Scandinavian organised crime is neither particularly violent nor international in scope (Korsell & Larsson 2011). The exception to this perception is the threat associated with OMCGs. As such, these groups are an important consideration in the development of modern crime policy across Scandinavian states.

This study shows that Denmark, Norway and Sweden have not taken legal steps to dissolve OMCGs, although the Danish government have attempted to do so on several occasions. These attempts failed because the ban was seen as unconstitutional, and this failure can be understood as a pretext to the much broader policies that have evolved at local and national levels. This paper has demonstrated that Scandinavian strategies against OMCGs are politically intertwined with overarching social integration programs that target disenfranchised youths and minorities. Yet it is only Danish policymakers that have acknowledged OMCG and gang-related violence as a national problem; they have increased their efforts to unite government agencies and allocated substantial resources to the problem at both a national and a local level. As illustrated, the Danish government have, rather than relying on punitive measures alone, developed a multi-agency approach, what they refer to as a 'holistic approach'. This approach includes both long-term and short-term goals that rely on the coexistence of repressive policing strategies (the 'Al Capone model' and 'A solid grip on gangs') as well as rehabilitative efforts governed by social welfare agencies ('A way out'). This illustrates the coexistence of traditional efforts to deter OMCG crimes and the development of more innovative strategies that seek to prevent recruitment to gangs and encourage dissociation and desistance. In conclusion, the Danish approach contains elements that are both recognisable and unique in an international perspective, and is recognition that strategies to disband OMCGs are inadequate without accompanying exit strategies.

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**Synnøve Jahnsen is a researcher at the
Uni Research Rökkansenteret, Norway.**

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GPO Box 1936
Canberra ACT 2601, Australia
Tel: 02 6268 7166

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