

# Juvenile Gangs in Stockholm

By: Michael Johnson

(Conferencpaper to a international conference in Osla 1999 about Gangs)

## A FEW FACTS ABOUT THE COUNTY OF Stockholm

I shall begin by presenting some data aimed primarily at those not familiar with Stockholm, which will help to place Stockholm in a wider context.

**The county of Stockholm** is home to around 1.8 million residents, which constitutes around one-fifth of the population of Sweden. The county comprises 25 local authorities of which Stockholm City, the Swedish capital, is the largest with just over 730,000 residents. The figures cited relate to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1998. The county contains both rural and built up areas and is Sweden's only real metropolitan area in international terms.

The most common forms of employment in Stockholm are in the public sector, in commercial trading and in the banking and insurance industry. The county cannot be described as an industrial area although a number of manufacturing industries are represented in the area. Such industry is concentrated to certain parts of the Stockholm area, such as Södertälje.

The most attractive residential areas are to be found either in the centre of the city, or in certain of the residential areas consisting primarily of detached houses in the surrounding local authority areas. Least attractive are certain areas of public sector rental accomodation lying outside the city centre, and certain of the surrounding suburbs. Such suburbs are primarily owned by housing concerns working within the public sector, and were built between 1965 and 1975 as part of a massive building project known as the "Million Program" which represented an attempt to quickly get to grips with the housing shortage which had arisen in the Stockholm area. These areas are now populated by a high proportion of residents with social problems of one kind or another. The standard of the housing is good, however, and in many cases is at least as good as that of the more attractive residential areas of the city centre, so that despite the concentration of social problems in these suburbs, they cannot really be described as slum areas.

Of the residents of the county, nineteen per cent are from an immigrant background, and 4.4 per cent are unemployed. To exemplify the extremes found in Stockholm, in the wealthy residential area *Djursholm* in Danderyd, thirteen per cent of residents are from an immigrant background and the area has an unemployment rate of under two per cent, whilst in Rinkeby, in the Stockholm City council area, we find unemployment running at nine per cent, and 74 per cent of residents are from an immigrant background. Average income in Djursholm for individuals aged between 20 and 64 years is 335,800 Swedish crowns per year, whilst the corresponding figure for the residents of Rinkeby is 107,300 crowns.

The largest group of immigrants in the county of Stockholm are from Finland. This group comprises 24.6 % of all immigrants. Thereafter come immigrants from Turkey, who make up 5.9 % of the total, from Iran (4.9 %), Chile (3.9 %), Germany (3.6 %), Iraq (3.6 %) and Yugoslavia (3.4 %). The immigrants from Iran, Iraq and Chile are primarily political refugees whilst those from Yugoslavia, Germany and Turkey arrived in Sweden during periods of labour force immigration mainly during the 1960s and 1970s. The large number of Finnish immigrants can be seen as the result partly of the free market in goods, services and labour, that exists between the Nordic countries, and partly of the geographical closeness of Finland to Stockholm.

There are around 4700 police employed in the county, representing a ratio of one policeman to every 371 residents.

## **Crime in Stockholm County**

The pattern of crime varies within the county, primarily between the central area of the city and a number of well known "problem-suburbs". The central areas of the city are characterised by the kind of violent offences linked with the city's weekend nightlife, and also thefts from and of cars. In the suburbs, crime can be seen more as one of a number of social problems. These areas are distinguished by among other things low economic status, high levels of unemployment, and a high proportion of immigrants. Many known offenders live in these suburbs and a large proportion of crimes are committed locally; the offender lives in the same part of town or in the neighbourhood where the offence is committed. In these respects, Stockholm is not unlike other metropolitan areas in Europe.

### **Reported offences in the county of Stockholm 1997:**

The total number of offences reported to the police lay at just under 19,500 per 100,000 residents. The corresponding figure for Sweden as a whole was 13,500. Crimes against the person, including amongst other things common and aggravated assault, accounted for 2300 offences per 100,000 residents. For the country as a whole, this figure was 1500 per 100,000. Thirty-seven cases of murder, manslaughter or assault leading to death were recorded in Stockholm in 1997, which represents two per 100,000. This figure coincides with that for the country as a whole. The figure for property offences, including theft, robbery, and fraud was recorded at 14,300 per 100,000 residents. For the country as a whole, this figure was 10,300.

The crime in Stockholm county is thus high in comparison with that in Sweden as a whole, which is more or less what we would expect with the country's only major metropolitan area lying in the county.

### **Crime in Sweden in relation to the situation in Europe**

Cross-national statistical comparisons of reported offences are beset with many problems, such as those resulting from differences in judicial definitions, in statistical collection routines, in the counting methods used and in the classification of offences. In addition, such comparisons can be affected by differences in the tendency to report offences.

In respect to most of these differences, Sweden's counts are somewhat more conscientious than those of many countries. The methods used in producing crime statistics in Sweden mean that Sweden presents a higher crime level than many other countries. Every event reported as a crime is included in the statistics, for example, even if it then turns out that no offence was committed. In addition, all crimes are recorded in Sweden, even if they were committed on the same occasion, and in the case of several offences of the same type being perpetrated against the same victim (serial offences), each offence is counted separately. Attempted offences are counted in the same way as completed offences.

In order to place Sweden in an international perspective, I have instead looked at statistics relating to criminal victimisation. These are considered a more reliable means of making cross-national comparisons. The project "The International Crime Victimisation Survey" (ICVS) has compared the crime levels in 19 countries. The survey shows that the level of crime in Sweden lies around the average for Europe with the exception of the offence categories robbery and criminal damage to cars where Sweden presents a lower level of offending, and cycle thefts where Sweden lies above the European average. Sweden's crime profile is distinguished by a relatively large proportion of offences that can be described as less serious, or petty thefts. It might also be noted that Swedes are more inclined to report offences to the police than the respondents from any of the other countries, and that they were the least afraid to go out at night.

### **Placements in correctional facilities**

The number of individuals placed in correctional institutions in Sweden on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1998 lay at 4250. This constituted around 0.0006 (or just over one-half per thousand) of the population over 17

years of age. Of those sentenced to prison in 1997, 210 (or 2,3 per cent) of the total were sentenced to serve a term of five years or more.

## **THE STUDY**

### **The aims of the study**

Interest in gangs has increased in Sweden during the 1990s, both on the part of the police and social scientists and in the media. The police in Stockholm have published four reports describing or discussing gangs, for example, three of which have taken the form of surveys charting gangs in Stockholm. These reports have been given a great deal of publicity in the local and national media both on the television news and in newspapers. The principal aim of the current study has been, using these reports as a starting point, to try and increase the level of understanding for the gang situation in Stockholm. What lies behind the picture of the threats posed by gangs as portrayed by the police and in the media? In addition, the study aimed to contribute to an increased understanding of these groups of youths, or gangs, and their members, with regard to amongst other things their relation to the consumption of alcohol and drugs, and the use of violence. When definitions of what actually constitutes a gang are so unclear, it has also been important to study this question more closely. What do different groups of informants mean when they use the term 'gang'?

### **Method**

The study comprises five smaller projects.

The first of these consists of eighteen interviews with a total of 24 police and social services officers. These informants come from nine of the 38 local police districts in Stockholm. Six of these districts were chosen on the basis of their having been identified as suffering from gang-related problems in the police reports mentioned above. All the police and social services personell interviewed have worked with youth-related problems at the local level.

In the second project, twelve youths who either write, or have written, graffiti have been interviewed, here referred to as "youth group G". This group was chosen for the study on the basis of statements published in the media contending that graffiti writers are organised into gangs. It is also claimed that they are involved in more serious criminality such as assaults, derailments, and even murder. These youths are aged between 15 and 27 years, and some of them have been interviewed a number of times, though none on more than four occasions. Contact was established with these youths via three independent channels.

The third and fourth projects are linked to one another. Three youths, referred to here as "youth group A", with a career of serious offending more or less behind them, have been interviewed on a total of ten occasions. The offences they have committed include robbery, burglary, assault and drug offences – both as drug users and as dealers. These youths grew up and were active in one of the 'gang areas' identified by the police where interviews were also carried out with representatives of the police and the social services.

The fourth project consisted of an observation study in the same area. I have spent around thirty evenings in the area, often in the company of two of the youths mentioned above. By choosing the places visited and the times of the visits the possibilities of finding gangs and other groups of youths in this area ought to have been relatively good. Since I have often been there together with the informants, I rate my chances of having gained access to relevant information as more than satisfactory.

The final project consisted of secondary analyses of the content of the reports published by the police charting the gang problem in Stockholm. These were carried out by two police officers by means of questionnaire surveys of the different local police districts in the county of Stockholm. Amongst other things, the respondents were asked how many gangs there are in their local areas,

what these look like, how large their membership is and so forth. The gang concept was not defined in the questionnaires.

### *The Interviews*

The primary and most important method used in this study was the "*semi-structured interview*". An important advantage with using this particular interview method over the questionnaire surveys, such as were used in the police gang reports mentioned earlier, is that the researcher affects the informant to a lesser extent. The more precise the questions posed, the greater the risk that the preconceived ideas and underlying assumptions of the researcher will steer the respondents' answers.

### *Defining the gang concept*

Defining what is meant with the term "gang", appears to be an almost impossible task. Different groups of professionals have different definitions depending on their own interest in the field and even researchers have been unable to agree on a uniform definition. Several researchers have gone so far as to express scepticism regarding the use of the concept at all. There is a similar definitional problem regarding when a certain offence is to be regarded as 'gang-related'. I have chosen, in the context of this study, not to begin with any fixed definition but rather to allow the informants themselves to describe what they mean when they use the term gang, and when they describe whether their area has experienced this phenomenon.

## **Results**

### *Interviews with police and social workers*

Several of these respondents appeared to associate the term gang with gangs of the "American" type and with the characteristics associated with these, such as a hierarchical structure, leaders, gang names, specific signs or symbols, claims to territory and so forth. None of the informants felt that gangs of this type were to be found in their own area, however, and the vast majority wanted to tone down the way the concept was used.

The groups of youths found in these areas were consistently described as collections of young people who had grown up together and gone to the same school and so on. Few of those interviewed felt that the groups in themselves constituted a serious problem of any kind and none of the informants presented any kind of alarmist picture of the gang problems in their area. Many pointed instead to the social problems from which these areas suffered as being the cause of the problems they experienced with youths in the area.

### *Youth group A*

The area that these young informants come from has one of the highest proportions of immigrant residents in Sweden and is often characterised as a problem area. The informants report that there are indeed gangs in the area but that there were more at the beginning of the 1990s than there are now. According to these youngsters, these gangs were not real "American" gangs since they do not have special names, do not defend turf, have no formal leaders, signs or symbols or special clothes. The groups are often comprised of individuals who have known each other for a very long time, having been classmates in school, for example, or neighbours. The reports did indicate however that informal leaders, who often got the final say, and who are turned to automatically, had emerged in some of the groups. Such individuals were respected by others in the group. The members of these groups came from a number of different parts of the world, and the informants contend that there is no ranking or discrimination on ethnic grounds within the groups.

### *The field study*

During the field study, I neither came into contact with or heard of anything that might suggest the existence of cohesive groups or gangs in the area of the study. Having been in places where such gangs ought sooner or later to have turned up, and having met a large number of youths, I feel that

my chances of discovering such groups, if they do indeed exist, would have been good.

### *Youth group G*

In the course of this interview study, nothing was found to indicate that graffiti writers in Stockholm are organised into gang-like structures. On the other hand, they do often write graffiti together with friends, some of them with the same group of friends, others with several different individuals or groups. Besides writing graffiti, the criminality of this group is primarily confined to thefts of spray-paint since this is extremely expensive in Sweden.

### *The police reports on gangs*

These reports indicated that the count of Stockholm is home to a relatively large number of gangs, and it was primarily this apparent profusion of gangs that the media picked up on. The gang concept was not defined in the context of these reports and a closer examination of the reports themselves indicates that the gangs described were very loose-knit groups, where both the numbers and ages of members remained largely unspecified. It is often very unclear which type of offences group members are suspected of and on what grounds. The reports from the local police districts certainly do not indicate a level of concern sufficient to justify the attention focused on the reports when they were published centrally.

## **Conclusions**

What has been most striking during the course of this study has been the complete absence of the kind of alarmist attitude toward gang-related crime that one might have expected to find on the basis of the way the problem has been presented both centrally by the police and in the media over the past several years. The picture presented by both police and social workers at the local level has, by contrast, indicated a desire to tone down the extent of the problem.

The gangs/groups of youths described by most of the informants included in this study are loose-knit and do not present the characteristics associated with American gangs. The groups described comprise youth people who have grown up and live together and/or who went to the same school. Some of these groups consist of individuals who are actively delinquent and one or two of the groups are described as presenting a problem. However very few of the informants, both police, social workers and youth, felt that the groups constituted a serious problem and none of them felt that it was the groups per se that were the problem; the feeling was rather that the problems experienced were a consequence of other adverse conditions in the area or in the youths' families. Several informants expressed the view that there were always underlying causes for youth-related problems and that troublesome groups of young people are not primarily the cause but rather the effect of problematical conditions. A large number of the informants refer to social problems, alcohol-related and psychological problems among parents, and violence in the families of these youths. A few expressed the view that such problems are the result of structural conditions such as the poor economic resources of those living in the area.

Common among the informants was the perception that there were no "real" gangs in their area. With "real" in this context they mean "American" gangs. The origins of this perception are unclear, but we can speculate that it might well have come from American books and films. If the informants equate the term "gang" with these "American gangs", it is not unreasonable to assume that others who come into contact with the gang concept make the same or similar associations, and these individuals may well lack the kind of insights into the realities of the situation in Stockholm necessary to make comparisons. The use of the term gang may thus lead to such persons labouring under the misconception that dangerous gangs of the American type are in fact to be found in Stockholm. This might in turn lead to an increase in the levels of irrational fear of crime in Swedish society.

The question is whether, in the light of the results of this study, we can contend that there are gangs in Stockholm. I would say that this depends on how the concept is defined. If the term gang refers

to a loose-knit group of young people, then Stockholm has gangs. If the term is instead used to refer to something more organised, more cohesive and hierarchical in structure, then my impression is that there aren't any to be found in Stockholm.

In order to – in a very simplified manner – compare the gangs/youth groups described in this study with the type of gang depicted in the international scientific literature, I will below compare the former with the criteria that Fondén and Sarnecki (1996 p 6) consider to be often present in different definitions of gangs. These criteria are:

1. The group consists primarily of teenage boys or young men, often with serious social problems
2. The group is coherent and has a clear leadership structure and hierarchy
3. The group has existed during a longer period of time
4. The group devotes itself to serious crime
5. The group is heavily armed
6. The group has a name and a symbol that is often depicted on the uniform-like clothing that the members wear
7. The group has a territory which is regarded as their own, in which the members act and that is "defended" against intruders
8. The group is in conflict with corresponding groups, and animosity and rivalry often lead to serious violence, including murder, of the members of other groups
9. The groups are often ethnically homogeneous, that is, consist of persons of the same minority

The criteria described above coincide well with the image of what a real "gang", or a real "American gang" is, that many of the informants in this study have. Below (table 1) these criteria are compared with the groups that appear in the present study.

Table 1

Comparison of how the characteristics that often are included in gang definitions fit the youth groups that the informants in this study describe. Explanation of the numbers in the table is to be found in the text above.

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>No similarity =0</b>	<b>Slight similarity =1</b>	<b>Average similarity =2</b>	<b>Great similarity= 3</b>
<b>1</b>				X
<b>2</b>		X		
<b>3</b>		X		
<b>4</b>		X		
<b>5</b>	X			
<b>6</b>	X			

7	X			
8	X			
9	X			

The result of this simple comparison demonstrate that gangs in Stockholms receive 6 points of the maximum of 27. The category that best corresponds is that the members primarily are teenage boys or young men. A real "gang" should fulfil most of the criteria and thereby obtain a much higher score. The motorcycle gangs, often allegedly criminal according to the media, should also, considering how they are depicted, obtain a high score.

This is not to say that there are no difficult or troublesome groups of youths in Stockholm, but if the content of the term gang has to be watered down to the extent needed to describe gangs with such a low level of cohesion as those found here, then there are some big question marks regarding the usefulness of the term in the Stockholm context.

## REFERENCES

**Ahlberg, Jan** (1991): "Brottsstatistik kan inte jämföras". *BRÅ-Appropå*, nr 1-2. s 4-10.

**Ball, Richard A. & Curry, G. David** (1995): "Criminology: Purposes and Methods for Defining "gang"." *Criminology*, Vol 33, No 2, s 225-245.

**BRÅ-rapport 1998:3**: *Kriminalstatistik 1997*. Sveriges officiella statistik 1997.

**BRÅ-rapport** (1999:3): *Internationella jämförelser av brottsligheten*. Brottsförebyggande rådet, Stockholm

**Bursik, Robert Jr. & Grasmick, Harold G.** (1993): *Neighborhoods and Crime. The Dimensions of Effective Community Control*. Lexington Books, New York.

**Fondén, Charlotta & Sarnecki, Jerzy** (1996): *Brottsliga ungdomsnätverk i Stockholm 1995. Brottsliga nätverk/ungdomsgäng, rapport 7*. Samordningskansliet för brottsförebyggande åtgärder, Stockholm.

**Horowitz, Ruth** (1990): "Sociological Perspectives on Gangs: Conflicting Definitions and Concepts". Huff, C., Donald (ed): *Gang in America*. Sage Publications, Newbury Park, London, New Delhi. s 37-54.

**Kjaer Jensen, Morgens** (1995): *Kvalitativa metoder för samhälls- och beteendevetare*. Studentlitteratur, Lund.

**Kvale, Steinar** (1997): *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun*. Studentlitteratur, Lund

**Layder, Derek** (1993): *New Strategies in Social Research*. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.

**Länskriminalpolisens integrationsgrupp** (1998): *Rapport om kriminella gäng, rasism och Främlingsfientlighet*. AA-191-78645-97.

**Maxson, Cheryl L. & Klein, Malcolm W.** (1990): "Street Gang Violence: Twice as Great, or Half as Great?" Huff, C. Donald: *Gang in America*. Sage publications, Newbury Park, London, New Delhi. s 71-100

**Polismyndigheten i Stockholms län** (1995): *Kartläggning beträffande kriminella ungdomsgäng samt främlingsfientlighet och rasism i Stockholms län*.

**Polismyndigheten i Stockholms län** (1997): *Rapport om kriminella gäng, rasism och främlingsfientlighet i Stockholms län*. AA 489-961/97.

**Polismyndigheten i Stockholms län** (1998): *Regional Hotbildsbedömning För Polismyndigheten i Stockholms Län*. 36/1998.

**Sarnecki, Jerzy** (1983): *Brottsliga ungdomsgäng*. Brottsförebyggande rådet, Forskningsenheten, Rapport 1983:2, Stockholm.

**Saavidis, Costas** (1991): *Rinkebygänget*. Kriminologiska institutionen, Stockholms universitet, Stockholm

**Westfelt, Lars** (1998): "Utvecklingen av registrerade brott under efterkrigstiden. Sverige i europeisk belysning.", Hofer, Hanns von (red): *Brottsligheten i Europa*. Studentlitteratur, Lund.

**William-Olsson, Anna** (1998): *Ängängnet. En studie av ett brottsligt aktivt nätverk av unga män*. Kriminologiska institutionen, Stockholms universitet, Stockholm.