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Street gang phenomenon in Finland. How to avoid the "Swedish Road"?

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Contents

1 Introduction	3
2 The definition of street gang	3
3 Street gang involvement in Nordic cities	4
4 Street gang phenomenon in Finland	4
5 Finnish measures to prevent street gang phenomenon	5
6 Current situation is under control, for now	6
7 References	

1 Introduction

Street gangs and gang formation have been a topic of discussion in the Nordic countries for a long time, even though research on the subject is still developing. The phenomenon of street gangs and related problems has come to light. Especially in Sweden, awareness of the seriousness of this phenomenon has increased, as violent crimes committed by gangs have risen significantly. Regional gang formation, particularly in areas with socio-economic disadvantage, has brought about serious issues. (Kaakinen, Moeller, Mork Lomell, Valdimarsdóttir, Westfelt & Rostami 2024.) There is no globally unified definition for street gangs, which complicates the identification and intervention regarding this phenomenon.

The topic sparks extensive discussion in Finland, and there are concerns that the so-called 'Swedish road' might spread to Finland as well. Various action models and measures have been developed to address youth crime and the street gang phenomenon. These approaches are actively considered by multiple stakeholders.

However, in Finland, the street gang phenomenon is still relatively small. It is essential to ensure that the situation remains that way, and preventive measures play a significant role in preventing it from escalating following the Swedish model.

2 The definition of street gang

The street gang phenomenon is multiform and there is not only one definition to describe all street gangs. Street gangs vary in their activities. Some gangs engage in minor acts of vandalism, while others systematically commit serious crimes, focusing on activities such as drug trafficking or violent offenses. When speaking of street gang criminality, it is important to separate it from the juvenile delinquency and organized crime, even though there can be some similarities between them. Sometimes this distinction is difficult to perceive, as young people involved in street gangs have exploited non-gang-affiliated youth in criminal activities. (Kaakinen 2023, Police of Finland 2024.)

The term Eurogang has been defined regarding youth street gangs operating in Europe. The term is defined by The Eurogang Project, which is a network of European and American researchers. According to the Eurogang concept, a street gang is 'any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity'. These crimes are not merely isolated acts of violence; rather, they are systematic and ongoing in line with the group's nature. However, the Eurogang term does not unambiguously explain the concept of street gangs or fully differentiate them from other youth groups that engage in violence or from organized crime. Nevertheless, it has been used to distinguish European street gangs from those who operate in the United States. (Stummvoll 2021, 2; The Eurogang Project 2024.)

In the Nordic countries, young people belonging to street gangs according to the Eurogang definition, often exhibit a pro-criminal attitude. Their social circles include individuals who have committed crimes, and they have experienced criminal activity, such as in their neighborhoods. Additionally, their self-control and the level of control imposed by their

parents are lower than those not associated with a gang. Typically, they are adolescents. (Kaakinen, Moeller etc. 2024.)

Police of Finland defines street gangs as a permanent natured group of several people who repeatedly commit crimes together. The impact of these crimes affects mainly to the safety and order of public places. In addition to these features, street gangs have some general attributes, such as young age, network- like nature and drug and violence related crimes. These gangs also have connection to certain neighborhood area and they benefit social media to build gangs reputation. According to the definition of Police of Finland, individuals belonging to youth street gangs are primarily of immigrant background or second-generation immigrants. They are generally adults who have reached the legal age (age range from 18 to 30), but some minors have also been identified as part of these gangs. Belonging to a street gang itself is not defined as a crime in Finland, but it can be considered an aggravating factor in sentencing. (Kuronen 2023; Police of Finland 2024.)

3 Street gang involvement in Nordic cities

In a study conducted by the Nordic Research Council of Criminology (2024) youth involvement in street gangs was examined in Nordic cities, using the Eurogang definition. The study covered cities from all Nordic countries. In Finland, Helsinki and Turku were investigated. Street gangs were found in all the cities studied, but according to the research, youth participation in street gangs is most common in Stockholm, where approximately one in six young individuals belongs to a gang. In contrast, the proportion is less than ten percent in Helsinki and Turku. The situations in the Swedish cities of Stockholm and Gävle also stood out compared to other Nordic cities when examining young people belonging to street gangs and young people with friends who are part of street gangs; the numbers in Swedish cities were significantly higher than in other cities.

In the Nordic countries, young people belonging to street gangs are more likely to commit crimes than other young people, including more serious offenses, and they are also recruited into more serious criminal groups associated with street gangs. Criminal attitudes and behavior are linked to street gang involvement. Therefore, criminal policy measures should be specifically targeted at criminally active youth and youth groups to prevent the risk of street gang affiliation. (Kaakinen, Moeller etc. 2024; Kaakinen 2024.)

4 Street gang phenomenon in Finland

In Finland, street gangs primarily create insecurity at the local level, even though discussions about them occur nationally. There have been 10 groups identified and classified as street gangs, and they operate in the Helsinki metropolitan area, its surrounding municipalities, and the Turku region. These groups are estimated to consist of approximately 260 young individuals, so it's a relatively small number. Approximately half of them are members of a gang and the other half is engaged to a gang by being partners in crime or other contributors. The disruption caused by street gangs particularly affects order and safety in public places. (Police of Finland 2024.) These gangs primarily affect certain residential areas in cities, where there is a higher proportion of foreign-background residents compared to the general population, and where socio-economic disadvantage has accumulated. Based on this, a connection between regional disadvantage and gang

activity can also be observed in Finland. Due to the regional influence of gang formation, there is a risk that so-called parallel societies will form in the suburbs in the future. (Danielsson 2024, Ruissalo 2023.)

In Finland, it has been recognized that young people and young adults belonging to street gangs are predominantly of immigrant background. The Finnish National Bureau of Investigation has stated that the phenomenon of street gangs is closely related to the consequences of immigration. Especially second-generation immigrants are at risk, as they experience a sense of not belonging to society. (Ruissalo 2023.)

5 Finnish measures to prevent street gang phenomenon

The Police of Finland have taken several measures in recent years to combat street gang crime. These actions include standardizing the definition and identification procedures related to street gangs, as well as enhancing information sharing and collaboration among different police units and other stakeholders. In 2023, the Helsinki Police Department established its own investigative team specifically focused on investigating street gang-related crimes. This specialized team operates within the jurisdiction of the metropolitan area police units. According to the police's assessment, the measures they have implemented have significantly prevented the wider spread of street gangs in Finland. (Police of Finland 2024.)

In the fight against street gang crime, prevention is emphasized. According to Kaakinen (2024), preventive measures in street gang crime should be targeted at those young individuals and youth groups who are most active in criminal behavior. By combating youth crime in general, street gang crime can also be prevented. The 'Violence-Free Childhood' action plan (Korpilahti, Malja, Jääskeläinen & Murdoch 2023) includes prevention of street violence as part of its comprehensive cross-sectoral approach to preventing violence experienced by children. The plan outlines various measures, including early identification and support, prevention of recidivism, the role of child protection services, and interventions by organizations working with troubled youth involved in criminal activities.

Nevertheless, even though young people involved in street gangs in Finland are primarily of immigrant background or second-generation immigrants, there has not been a proven connection between ethnic background and the risk of involvement in criminal activities or joining gangs. Although there is much discussion about this relationship, young people from minority backgrounds do face more risk factors than their peers, such as discrimination, unemployment, and low income. From the perspective of preventing street gang crime, it is essential to invest in supporting the integration of immigrant parents and promoting employment, as these factors have been found to positively impact children's growth and learning. Focusing on integration can also help reduce the risk of criminal involvement among young people with immigrant backgrounds and second-generation immigrants, thus preventing participation in street gangs. (Korpilahti, Malja, Jääskeläinen & Murdoch 2023, 321 – 322.)

The development working group assembled by the Ministry of Justice has created a model (2018–2019) for young individuals exhibiting criminal behavior. The aim of this model is to support these young people in leading crime-free and substance-free lives. The target group for the model includes young individuals suspected of being involved in multiple and serious crimes, and whose situations have raised concerns among authorities or other stakeholders. In the model, the functions of various authorities and preventive services are coordinated within the criminal process according to individual needs. The model also



considers young people under the age of 15 who are not criminally responsible. (Ministry of Justice Finland 2019, 7 – 8.)

In order to 'combat' street gang crime, there has also been discussion about lowering the age of criminal responsibility from the current 15 years old to 14 years old or even 12 years old. In Finland Citizen initiatives have been made regarding the reduction of the age limit (for both ages) (Citizen Initiative Service 2021; Citizen Initiative Service 2024). Some political groups and politicians have also proposed lowering the age limit. Fortunately, these citizen initiatives have not gained much support, and the matter has not been advanced in the parliament, as lowering the age of criminal responsibility does not solve youth or street gang crime. According to researchers, it may have more detrimental than beneficial effects, and they emphasize so-called 'soft' approaches to preventing youth crime instead of harsher punishments. (Hara & Mäntysalo 2022.)

6 Current situation is under control, for now

In Finland, the volume of immigration is significantly lower compared to Sweden. We are currently talking about a relatively small street gang phenomenon. However, in Finland, we must still ensure that the situation does not develop into the same problem as in Sweden, where police officers do not go to certain suburban areas in certain situations. Also in Sweden, it is quite common for children or young people to be recruited as offenders, as they are not criminally responsible due to their age or receive more lenient sentences. (Kuronen 2023; Ruissalo 2023.) Although there is a lot of public discussion about street gangs here in Finland, and they raise concerns nationwide, the situation is not particularly alarming according to the statistics. The number of crimes committed by street gangs has not increased based on the reported crime notifications in recent years. Furthermore, there have been no signs of spreading or increased severity in street gang activities, even though the Finnish police have identified several groups that can be defined as street gangs and individuals belonging to these gangs. (Danielsson 2024.) Based on this, street gangs do not cause significant concern in Finland, at least for the time being. Now is the time to take the measures to avoid the Swedish road becoming a reality.

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