



# **Shootings in criminal milieu**

*An interview study*

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English summary of report 2019:3

**The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) –  
centre for knowledge about crime and crime prevention measures**

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This is a summary of the Brå report Skjutningar i kriminella miljöer – en intervjustudie, report no 2019:3

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URN:NBN:SE:BRA-822

# Summary

Lethal gun violence in criminal milieux has increased over time (Brå 2015a; Swedish Police Authority 2018a). Therefore, Brå has conducted a study of shootings in criminal milieux. The study is based primarily on interviews with individuals who have been active in the milieux where gun violence occurs. It is based on three overall lines of enquiry.

- How are the structures of, and relationships in, criminal milieux described by the individuals who have been active in them?
- How are conflicts and shootings described?
- Based on this, how can we understand the presence and function of gun violence in criminal milieux?

## The path into the criminal milieu

The interview subjects describe their almost imperceptible progress into involvement in a criminal milieu that they did not have any real need to question or distance themselves from. A recurring theme in their childhood narratives is the weak connection to family and school. This may involve unstable family situations and a rootless existence, or prematurely interrupted schooling. Other interview subjects talk about how the family's financial troubles impacted their childhood. Some subjects also attest to perceptions that their own residential area is seen as inferior to other residential areas. For certain interview subjects, these perceptions appear to be bolstered through experiences of what they see as unjustified police monitoring. Many also appear to have seen few possibilities for themselves, for example in respect of continued schooling and ordinary jobs.

In fact, the path into the criminal milieu seldom appears at all to be a path *into* something. The criminal milieu has, namely, existed as a daily element in the residential areas of most of the interview subjects. The milieu holds promises of money, social status, and an available career path – the promise to *be someone*, as the interview subjects say. A particularly important aspect which they describe appears to be the social relationships which enable participation in the milieu. The path into the milieu is often via individuals who the person likes and admires. Accordingly, it appears to be less about "recruitment" than about socialising with friends who are criminally active, which subsequently transitions into one's own participation.

## Fickle relationships and unstable structures

Relationships and cooperation in the criminal milieu are often described in terms of "friendship" and "loyalty", and the interview subjects emphasise the significance of having grown up together. Several interview subjects object to the idea that they are a part of established, stable collaborations. They do *not* identify themselves as formal networks or gangs, and this also does not appear to be a desirable ideal. This appears to originate, on the one hand, from the idea of friendship and, on the other hand, from valuing independence. Some interview subjects also state that participation in organised groups leads to problems and makes life more difficult.

While friendship and loyalty are recurring themes, the relationships appear to be unreliable. The interview subjects talk a great deal about loyalty in general, but less about specific roles or responsibilities which bind relationships together over time. It appears that people are not dependent on each other for purposes of conducting their criminal activities. Perhaps this is, in part, the reason why there is always a likelihood that friendship and loyalty will suddenly turn to competition and enmity. In some cases, the description of the relationships in the milieu take on an almost paradoxical quality, particularly in stories regarding friends

who betray, assault, or even murder each other. This does not necessarily mean that the loyalty is "false", i.e. that one pretends to be loyal or lies to oneself about loyalty. In strictly pragmatic terms, one must attempt to rely on one's friends in this milieu, *in spite of* the fact that its nature is such that everything can change in an instant.

Taken as a whole, our interview subjects provide a picture of a criminal milieu which is relatively unstable. One important aspect is that the relationships that it builds on often appear to have taken form outside of the criminal milieu. The interview subjects describe how their entry into, and advancement in, the criminal milieu did not require them to seek out the criminal milieu, form new contacts, or prove themselves to be trustworthy. The trust which is useful in the criminal milieu is largely already there, produced outside of the milieu or on its periphery. The interview subjects' discussions of "friendship" and "loyalty" appear to reflect this aspect specifically.

## The criminal markets

The picture provided by the material is that drug sales, at different levels, constitute the dominant criminal activity in the milieu. Several interview subjects have also sold guns. Sales of both drugs and guns are repeatedly described as a job and the interview subjects underscore the need for knowledge and skill.

The markets for drugs are described in somewhat different ways. The cannabis market appears to be relatively accessible to both sellers and buyers. Obtaining cannabis for sale appears to have been quite unproblematic for our interview subjects, and there are many who have sold it in their residential areas. The cocaine market, on the other hand, is described as more exclusive. The interview subjects say that the seller travels to their customers and that personal relationships have greater significance than as is the case when selling cannabis. Several interview subjects also state that the drug market, particularly the lower levels of the cannabis market, have become "more open" over time and easier to enter.

The gun market is described as more closed. According to the interview subjects, the seller is exposed to many risks – not in the least the risk of being shot with a weapon that they have sold. Accordingly, personal relationships and trust become more important; the seller chooses the customer, and not the other way around. Accordingly, there is a series of barriers on the gun market, although several interview subjects state that the purchase of guns is easier than it was previously.

## Violence as power currency

According to the interview subjects, the conflicts which lead to shootings are most often rooted in the drug market but may also involve personal relationships. Irrespective of the origin of a conflict, our interview subjects emphasise that it is the *consequences* of the conflict that are crucial, in other words how the conflict affects one's status and position in the criminal milieu. Thus, it does not appear to be the conflict *itself* – drug debts, girlfriends, or sales territory – which is important. The interview subjects state that the people in the criminal milieu watch every step they take and in the battle for position *everything* matters. As a result, people also take things very seriously. Consequently, many interview subjects see gun violence as an investment in their own criminal career, since the violence is a way of building up one's reputation and thus strengthening one's position.

Reputation – the fact that others know your name and what you are capable of – is associated with profit, such as the possibility of gaining more influence over the local drug market. At the same time, reputation is short-lived and easily lost. Consequently, it must be maintained and defended constantly. Conflicts and shootings can thus be useful in the competition for position and power, both on the drug market and in the criminal milieu as a whole.



A closely-related theme in the interviews involves the change in violence over time. The interview subjects explain that more, or more serious, violence must be used in order to advance or protect one's own position. They also say that young, peripheral participants in the criminal milieu are more likely than before to take the chance of advancing by shooting. It might be possible to say that what the interview subjects describe is a sort of inflation process – more violence is required in order to achieve a specific effect. If the participants in the milieu proceed on the basis of such assumptions, it is likely to have consequences in respect of their incentive to seek peaceful solutions when conflicts arise.

## Violence as defence

The interview subjects also understand violence using guns as a way of protecting oneself. This is justified by both their own experiences of victimisation and a general awareness of the risks which follow from participating in the criminal milieu. This milieu is described as a context in which one is constantly in risk of one's life since everyone – according to the interview subjects – carries a weapon and there is a constant violent struggle for position. The material also sheds light on how guns change the conflicts and affect the exercise of violence in the criminal milieu by increasing the risk of all parties involved at the same time as they limit other possible alternatives.

Many interview subjects describe life in the milieu as characterised by fear, stress, and anxiety. They also describe how they have attempted to fend off their vulnerability in various ways. Some interview subjects state that they have become observant in respect of strange cars in the vicinity and avoided their own homes in order that they not be found there. Others say that they have acquired guns, which they put under their pillows when they sleep in order to be able to react quickly in the event of a threat. Several interview subjects also say that one must shoot first in order to prevent being shot. Some state, in addition, that the need for these types of strategies has increased over time, and that one needs to resort to serious violence in order to prevent a retaliation which one can count on occurring.

At the same time, the interviews show that this "defence perspective" is full of paradoxes. Owning a gun and being involved in a shooting appears to increase one's own exposure to violence rather than to decrease it, since it can provoke reactions from others who feel threatened. Conflicts are kept alive in this way and can escalate until it is impossible to "shoot your way out" as one interview subject describes it.

## Resistance to police involvement

The constant presence of violence in the criminal milieu is also reflected in the attitude towards the police. There is widespread consensus that talking to the police can jeopardise one's own safety and, perhaps, that of one's family. Linked to this is the perception that the police also cannot provide protection against victimisation for a person who participates in a criminal investigation. Conflicts are instead handled *within* the criminal milieu. The material contains statements that the police do not have anything to do with the conflict, that it is desirable to resolve it personally by means of a shooting, and that a person's criminal identity is destroyed by talking – even if the resistance to involvement by the police does not appear to be absolute.

Moreover, the police have a legitimacy problem, which is attested to by a number of interview subjects. This is expressed, for example, through narratives about the individual doubting the intentions of the police – whether they are actually interested in protecting the individual from violence. There are also interview subjects who explain that their negative perception of the police has been confirmed by their own experiences. Consequently, to some extent, the fact that individuals want to handle conflicts within the criminal milieu can be understood in the context of the feeling that the police are not there for them.. At the same time, this also impedes the police's opportunity to play a role in handling the conflict.

## Alternatives to shooting

The interview subjects also discuss alternatives to shooting. There are two primary possibilities which appear in the material – mediation and completely desisting from the criminal milieu.

Mediation is sometimes a possible route. This is the case primarily between individuals with high positions in the criminal milieu, since their position does not directly depend on their exercise of violence. The most important factor for a successful mediation appears to be that the mediator has the personal trust of all participants in the conflict. This usually means that the mediator has personal experience from and good relationships in the criminal milieu. Mediators who lack this connection are not seen as similarly reliable. A successful mediator often uses the individual's own ambivalence towards using violence for the purpose of finding latitude for an alternative form of conflict management. However, it appears to be difficult to mediate if there are strong expectations of a retaliatory action, for example when a conflict has already progressed to the point where someone has been shot.

Another way of avoiding gun violence is to desist from the criminal milieu, which is the experience of a number of our interview subjects. Many of them state that their participation in the milieu was not what they had anticipated. This feeling appears to be based in part on the breakdown of loyalty and fellowship over time, and in part on violence in the milieu having come altogether too close or having become more and more manifest. However, withdrawing from a criminal milieu is a complex process. Some interview subjects describe that they have desisted from the milieu, while others have only expressed a wish to desist or are uncertain about what to do. The greatest impediment does not seem to be that it would be impermissible to desist, but rather that participation in the criminal milieu encompasses so much of one's life that it becomes difficult to see realistic alternatives. Consequently, it is not surprising that those who succeeded in desisting specifically emphasise the importance of help and support in formulating a new lifestyle.

## Brå's assessment

The report does not provide any straight answers as to what can be done to fight gun violence. Our primary contribution is to provide a knowledge base which, in combination with other studies and data, can hopefully create better understanding for the occurrence of the shootings. This understanding is itself a condition for conducting crime prevention work. Based on the results of the report, we can, however, identify a number of areas which should be of specific importance to the preventive work.

In the report, we describe how the criminal milieu can be perceived as a relatively everyday affair into which the interview subjects have more or less become embedded. This underscores the fact that the milieu cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of society, but rather mirrors overall societal changes and conditions. Consequently, more overall efforts may be important, for example in socially disadvantaged areas.

We also see that gun violence serves not only as a means for strengthening one's position, but is also used to protect one's life. Concern over being shot appears repeatedly in the material. Consequently, it is also worthwhile to work to facilitate and stimulate desistance from the criminal milieu, for example by providing more support to persons who wish to desist than is currently the case.

In addition, the criminal milieu is maintained by the markets which constitute the principal economic activity in the milieu – primarily the drug market. In such case, focus should be placed not only on the availability of drugs – which could perhaps be regulated by combatting importation and smuggling – but also on demand. The reason for this is that conflicts which are based on, for example, competition for sales territory and customers, do not appear to be uncommon.

In and of itself, the access to guns and ammunition creates the conditions for gun violence.

Moreover, our material shows that the participants in the criminal milieu must always assume that everyone has access to guns, which appears to form how violence is used in the milieu. Crime prevention work should therefore be focused on further reducing the importation of guns and ammunition into Sweden. It is not possible to say whether this will lead to the use of other weapons instead of guns, which would mean that the violence would remain in place. However, with fewer guns in circulation, there is at least a possibility of reducing mortality in the criminal milieu.