

English summary

Crime among motorcycle gangs

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In the summer of 1997, the Ministry of Justice assigned the Committee for Crime Prevention Work to support Helsingborg's municipality in its efforts to develop a local crime prevention plan of action to deal with criminality among the motorcycle gangs. The municipality also wanted the Committee's support in making a survey of what was known about criminal motorcycle gangs. The Committee handed over the assignment to the National Council for Crime Prevention.

During the 1990s, criminality in connection with motorcycle gangs has come to stand out as a problem for the Swedish society, not only because the criminal activity linked to motorcycle gangs is often serious – for example, the showdown between two motorcycle gangs that went on for four years in the mid-90s left eleven people dead and 96 injured – but also because such activity appears to pose a threat to the legal system as such. Judges, prosecutors and witnesses have been threatened in connection with the trials of members of motorcycle gangs.

Today there are some 300 motorcycle clubs in Sweden. The better part of these groups are clubs made up of motorcycle enthusiasts who are not involved in criminal activity. However, there are about 20 clubs in which various forms of criminality are present (in the report, the term "motorcycle gangs" is used to denote these clubs).

The first motorcycle gang, Hell's Angels, was founded in the USA in 1947. During the 1950s and 1960s, the other three gangs that share with them the epithet "the big four" – Outlaws (1959), Pagans (1959) and Bandidos (1966) – were organised. Soon thereafter, motorcycle gangs were established in

Scandinavia, first in Denmark, where a four-year conflict between two gangs took a toll of eleven lives, and then in Sweden, where motorcycle gangs first came to public attention during the conflict between the Hell's Angels and the Bandidos in the beginning of the 1990s.

One main approach has been to study the extent to which motorcycle gangs in Sweden are involved in organised crime and what motives or purposes lie behind the crimes that are committed. Studies have also been made of how motorcycle gangs are organised and to what degree the members of these gangs have had criminal charges brought against them.

These analyses proceed from three possible perspectives of the motorcycle gang phenomenon. First, the subcultural perspective, which presupposes that motorcycle gangs are an association of people with common ideals, for example, a kind of brotherhood ("One for all, and all for one") in which status is an important element. It should be possible to explain a large part of the motorcycle gangs' criminality from this perspective. The second perspective allows the motorcycle gangs to be perceived as a criminal organisation of the classical model, similar to the Italian Mafia in the USA. The third perspective, which applies to the motorcycle gangs in Sweden, are basically something in between the first two. Here, the motorcycle gangs are seen as confederations that entertain certain subcultural values, and in which certain forms of organised crime are present, although the groups are not per se criminal organisations. The organised crime that does occur is committed by groups of members, sometimes in league with persons outside the gangs. In contrast to the practice among purely criminal organisations, the profits of such criminal activity do not fall to the club as such.

Perusal of the criminal register for all the members of the Hell's Angels and the Bandidos (100 people) shows that the large majority of these individuals have been charged with crimes: 75 of them have been formally charged, and nine more are suspected on good grounds. In all, these members have been brought to trial 756 times. For these crimes, they have been sentenced to a total of 151 years. However, the 20 persons with the most extensive criminal records were responsible for 505 of the 756 trial instances, and were sentenced to 111 of the 151 years. In other words, criminality in the gangs is unequally distributed. This lends support to the hypothesis that the Swedish motorcycle gangs' crimes are mainly committed by certain groups of members, and not necessarily in an organised form.

To be effective, the measures that society takes against the motorcycle gangs should therefore be focused on the members who are involved in organised crime.