

Defections from Criminal Groups in the Largest Cities in Sweden: Analyzing Municipal Exit Programs

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Summary

This report examines the exit programs and existing policies that support defectors from criminal groups in the three largest cities in Sweden: Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö. The objective is to enhance our understanding of how municipalities work with individuals seeking to leave criminal organizations in their day-to-day operations and to identify the challenges facing exit programs as an increasing number of defectors seek assistance to leave criminal groups. The report is based on prior research on exit programs and offers an overview of research on defections in the Swedish context.

The primary research method employed is qualitative interviews. When available, I have also compiled statistics. There are currently no established structures for gathering nationwide statistics, resulting in a lack of data regarding nationwide numbers of defectors, support efforts for defectors, and the costs associated with Swedish defector operations. Interviews were conducted with key exit program representatives in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö.

Supporting defectors represents a complex endeavor. Defectors constitute a group having lived outside conventional social norms and rules, often grappling with multiple concurrent issues such as a history of violence, threats, trauma, unemployment, and financial burdens. Effective exit programs require collaborative efforts between various authorities. The report explores the challenges in establishing a common language and uniform definitions and concepts. Some questions arise in this context, including who qualifies as a defector, how municipalities gauge motivation, which criteria defectors must meet, and what constitutes a successful defection.

The findings reveal a wealth of knowledge and experience in Swedish municipalities regarding defector support. However, the work is complicated by vague definitions and structural challenges linked to municipal autonomy, social service regulations, and other constraints. The field of defector support faces numerous obstacles as the demand for assistance grows, including housing shortages, long waiting lists for trauma and psychiatric care, and the emergence of non-governmental entities offering services to defectors. Municipalities and law enforcement actors must also address safety and protection concerns for defectors with serious criminal records placed in different municipalities to ensure that rival defectors are not located in close proximity to one another.

The report identifies several areas in which the exit programs may be further developed and strengthened. Currently, there is a lack of ongoing monitoring to assess the progress of defectors over time, which makes it challenging to draw conclusions regarding the individual outcomes of support efforts. Additionally, there is a need for a nationwide framework for managing data and statistics in order to facilitate research in this field. Another area warranting further development is the issue of young defectors and new recruitments into criminal groups. Based on the content and interviews in the report, I offer some suggestions on how exit programs may be strengthened.

Establish a national framework or structure: A national framework should be developed encompassing clear objectives for the exit programs and a collaborative strategy. This framework would be responsible for budget allocation, guidelines, standardizing definitions, regulations, and divisions of responsibilities. The ongoing efforts to create a national strategy should continue with a focus on effectively enabling and implementing such a strategy. Furthermore, it is essential to ensure that smaller municipalities lacking support structures receive the necessary support, such as advice and information. Material and resources should also be provided to actors practically involved with defectors. In designing this national framework, it is imperative to incorporate the expertise, experience, and knowledge present in the existing municipal exit programs. A working group consisting of representatives from established exit programs and relevant government agencies may help ensure that local expertise is preserved and that activities remain rooted in local contexts.

Establish a national register manager: There is currently a lack of structures for managing statistics on the total number of defectors in Sweden, their relapse into criminal behavior, and successful reintegration into society after interventions. Standardized forms for data collection and follow-ups are crucial when it comes to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the target population. One suggestion is to appoint a national platform or government agency responsible for maintaining data, such as a data register, thereby ensuring long-term follow-up capabilities. This effort could also explore integrating other relevant data sources, such as the cause of death register and data on employment, welfare support, etc.

Create a national structure for managing the relocation of defectors subject to threats or violence: There is currently no national structure for managing the placement and relocation of defectors facing serious security concerns. Given the need for secure placements, it is essential that there are guidelines for municipalities and the police to ensure safety in such situations. Since the police already handle similar types of registers, they could be responsible for establishing and overseeing this register or a suitable control structure.

Identify the target group: Smaller municipalities lacking exit programs should assess the potential need for such services. This assessment should involve mapping criminal groups and target populations that could benefit from such services. Ensuring that everyone has access to exit programs, regardless of geographic location, should be an ongoing priority.

Determine resources and needs: Analyze existing resources and assess additional requirements for implementing exit services. This evaluation should encompass personnel costs, training, and methodological support. Creating a comprehensive overview of the costs for society related to exit programs will help determine an adequate budget and efficient resource allocation.

Evaluate the results: To maintain and ensure the quality of exit programs, it is crucial to perform both internal assessments and external evaluations. Evaluations regarding effectiveness should cover all municipal exit programs including those operated by non-governmental entities. Regular evaluations help identify success factors and areas for improvement while ensuring compliance with evidence-based treatment models and research.

Improve continuously: Regular meetings between municipalities may foster sharing experiences, identifying problems, strategy development, and establishing clear definitions. This collaborative approach will enhance the knowledge of staff and drive continuous improvement in the exit programs.

Continue analyzing the issue of young defectors with high-risk profiles: Explore whether exit programs should play a more prominent role in crime prevention efforts aimed at preventing young people from joining criminal gangs. Young defectors may require different types of support than the ones available in the main exit programs. Current laws and regulations concerning case management for young people should be considered. The main exit programs possess valuable experiences and resources to address young defectors with high-risk profiles. Hence, it is advisable to assess whether young defectors facing severe issues, currently excluded from exit service support, may be incorporated into main exit programs.

About the author

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