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Gang entry and exit

- *A study of previous gang members in Sweden*

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LUND UNIVERSITY  
Department of Sociology,  
Cultural Criminology

Master's thesis SOCM04 30 credits  
Spring semester 2021



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## **Abstract**

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Serious violence that is connected to gangs has escalated drastically in Sweden in the past years. I argue that understanding the values and attractions of joining a criminal gang are crucial in order to prevent further recruitment. In order to successfully reintegrate previous gang members, increased knowledge of the exit-process is needed. Hence, this thesis is based on interviews with eight defectors from gangs. They were asked to talk about their experiences when entering, leaving, and living a life without gangs. As narrating these experiences, I strived to capture how they described different elements of street culture in their stories. The vantage point of analysis in this thesis is narrative criminology combined with Bourdieusian criminology. These theories offer fruitful tools when striving to understand how people ascribe meaning to their actions and experiences, and how they describe an embodied character of the street. This study will show that being a part of a gang is, however, more than committing crimes together. When gang members are deep in the street culture, they have started to identify themselves with the street culture and created a street habitus. The interviewees have experienced a lot of violence, both as offenders but also as victims. The violence might be grueling, but it might also not go along with future plans and one's identity. Leaving a gang is a complex and difficult process. In total, seven different narratives were identified in the analysis. It can be argued that the identified narratives serve several purposes and that they sometimes lack a coda or conclusion. Hence, a lot of the interpretive work is left to the listeners and readers to decide.

Keywords: Defector, experience, gang, narrative criminology, street culture

## **Popular science summary**

Different types of criminal gangs, including everything from loosely composed networks to more organized constellations, have been perceived as a growing problem in Sweden. This has resulted in gang conflicts, both within gangs, with rival gangs, and between gangs and mainstream society. As a consequence, the Ministry of Justice have developed a special agenda, called the 34-point program, including varying efforts in order to combat organized crime in Sweden. A part of the 34-point program is to come up with a national exit-program, to strengthen society's support for people who want to leave criminal and/or violent extremist environments and groups.

However, in Swedish research, relatively little attention has been paid to stories by those involved in the actual gang environment and also how an exit-process is carried out. This study is based on interviews with eight men participating in an exit-program, in other words defectors from gangs. They were asked to share their experiences about both why they decided to join a gang and also leave the gang environment, and finally how their lives have turned out without the gang.

Being part of a gang is not only about committing crimes, as this thesis will show. Within this milieu, there are norms and values that are only valid within this context, which will be referred to as street culture. Being part of a gang is also about finding a sense of belonging, growing up with friends from the same area, where violent actions started as a game and were done for fun, and further on developed into serious violence and crime.

My wish is to contribute with knowledge of what motivates both the involvement and the departure from a gang. Topics such as brotherhood, identity, violence, and hope will be interpreted. The actual crime is not in the focus, but rather the defectors' own words of their reality, focusing on their experiences.

## Acknowledgments

Working with this thesis has been a great privilege. During the conversations with the men who are going through an exit-process, and both working with themselves and with leaving criminal gangs, I have gained knowledge both about what made gang life attractive to them, and why it became difficult to live within this environment. I have reasoned with them about how the gang life has affected them, what it meant to be a part of the gang, how they saw their own role within the street culture, and what matters overweight when deciding to leave this environment. Joyful events, as well as painful situations, have been relived during the interviews. I am so grateful for all these meetings, where the men reflected on their life choices and what influenced them in future actions. I have done my best to capture and convey their stories throughout this thesis.

I want to thank my supervisor Sébastien Tutenges, for your support, feedback, inspiration, encouragement, and indulgence throughout the work with this thesis. I also want to thank Erik Hannerz who together with Sébastien have been the main teachers and creators of the master program in Cultural Criminology. You are the best teachers a student could ask for, always engaging, motivating, and lifting up your students. The master program you have created was more than I ever could have wished for. Thank you for these two amazing years!

Och till deltagarna i arbetet vill jag rikta några välvalda ord,

Tack för allting! Tack för att ni har öppnat upp er, berättat om så privata livshändelser, visat er vara sårbara och att ni är lika vanliga människor som vem som helst. Utan er hade detta inte varit möjligt. Jag önskar er all lycka i framtiden och tror på er och er förändring. Ge aldrig upp!

Stockholm, May 2021  
Alexandra Westerlund

## Key terms

Initially, some terms need to be defined. This is a study about what is popularly called *gang members*. In the Swedish judiciary, the term *network* is often used. When talking with people who are designated as gang members or have connections to networks, they often point out that they perceive the gang itself and other gang members as a *group of friends* who grew up in the same area. As previous research has often used the concepts and definitions of a *gang* and *street culture*, I will also use these expressions, when referring to different contexts in the field, such as gang environment, gang context, the street, gang members, and gang-related problems. This is to achieve a coherent text and to facilitate the reader's ability to string along with these complex and problematic definitions. I would like to emphasize that the people I have studied are much more than former gang members. They are also citizens, fathers, sons, neighbors and much more.

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# 1 Introduction

Gangs occur and operate in all parts of the world, there are similarities in how they organize themselves and what ideas and norms are usually praised and acknowledged (Hagedorn 2008). Organized crime has existed in Sweden for a long time, but during the past years, it has escalated drastically. A trend can be discerned within the organized criminality structure. According to a mapping done by the Swedish police authority's intelligence service, gangs were previously marked by being hierarchically constructed, which today is not as noticeable. Today gangs are more loosely composed, due to cooperation in varying criminal arrangements. One can be involved in several constellations and run different errands for different gangs (see e.g., Polismyndigheten 2019; Brå 2016a).

According to the Swedish police intelligence service (Polismyndigheten 2019), the majority of the recently emerged gangs are local criminal networks, a category that is engaged in visible criminality and harm mainstream society and residents' perceived safety. This category is distinguished by mainly being active and having a connection to a specific geographical area. More or less all gangs that are identified as local criminal networks are functioning within drug crimes. Conflicts between gangs that are competing for local drug markets can lead to public shootings, which highly affect mainstream society. This includes a high risk of harming third parties, which to a large extent has a negative effect on the perceived security in the local area. Another issue that affects the societal impact is the visible and easily accessible drug management. *Järvaområdet* (area of Järva) in Stockholm has been a hot topic in the evening post, as well as in reports written by the Swedish Police or the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. During the year 2020 several open shootings took place in this residential area on the streets, in parks, or yards (Polisen 2020). Another problematic aspect is the presence of pressure on residential living in the area. Several of the gangs contribute to "a culture of silence" (Polismyndigheten 2019: 12). This renders it difficult to get witnesses and plaintiffs to provide information to the police. Due to non-existent witness protection, many fear reprisals, either after explicit threats and pressure that falls under abuse in court or through self-censorship. The phenomenon of self-censorship also occurs among authority officials and can lead to failure to make negative decisions, which is judged to be systemic (Polismyndigheten 2019).

Serious violence that is connected to gangs has escalated drastically. A definition that is frequently used when describing the seriousness and dignity of violence, is violence capital. *Violence capital* is a concept that is used both within academia but also by the media and the judiciary. These concepts do however not have the exact same meaning. Within academia, the theoretical concept “violence capital” is derived from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his view on society (see e.g., Sandberg 2008). A detailed explanation of this will be presented in the theory section. Briefly, Bourdieu (see e.g., 1984, 1986) describes capital as a totality of specific assets which are ought to be productively used. Within street research, the concept of street capital has been crystallized and violence capital is a core component of this mentioned capital. Media and the judiciary use the term more simply, as they refer to a gangs’ ability to use and incite violence or threats. They have argued that violence is of importance since it intimidates other concurring gangs (Polismyndigheten 2019). *Dödspatrullen* (the Death patrol) is a gang in Stockholm that is well known for having a large violence capital. They have for several years been in an open conflict with *Shottaz* and many have been killed due to this conflict (see e.g., Expressen 2021). The large capital is in general illustrated by partly having access to weapons and explosive substances and partly using these in violent situations. Several parameters affect the totality of the violence capital, these can for instance be weapons, explosive substances, beatings, kidnappings, and history of conflicts between different gangs. Some gangs or individuals with higher status also instigate for instance shootings, stabbings, or kidnappings (Polismyndigheten 2019). The shooting statistics from past years show that plaintiffs are getting younger. This also indicates that the recruitment of new members of gangs is decreasing in age. According to the police intelligence service, two-thirds of the local criminal network have members who are under the age of sixteen. This is also shown in statistics of regional gun violence, as these show that the average age of offenders and victims has fallen in comparison to previous years. There is not any clear pattern of change regarding the age range, which creates fear within both authorities and mainstream society. In this report, written by the police intelligence service, it is also discussed that this circumstance is, however, expected to occur to a greater extent than what is known by the police or any other involved authority (Polismyndigheten 2019).

Gangs are also visible within the cultural industry. The Swedish rap and hip-hop music continue to grow by each year, and lately, it has been discussed whether artists who are known to be either actively involved in criminal activities, and/or are executing prison sentences or suspected of a crime, should be allowed to take part in music awards or even be



included in Spotify. Some fear that the street culture, that is presented in songs, influences other youths who are at risk for being recruited to be inspired by the easy money and flashy lifestyle. Even on Instagram, some members of gangs pose openly with sharp-charged automatic weapons. The criminal “brand” and what may be termed the “commodification of crime” (Hayward & Young 2012: 124) is more visible and accessible than ever, and influences more people through different platforms to a bigger extent than before (Polismyndigheten 2019). The police have noticed a big change on social media platforms. They see that gangs build their brands throughout these platforms, which previously took place out on the streets where the gangs self-marked themselves, by vests or hoodies. On social media, the gang’s own brand is built and maintained. There are a lot of films about money, fast cars, designer clothes and girls. A lot of “influencer-mentality” has been adopted and the underlying mechanisms are the same (ibid.). This development might have facilitated the recruitment process. It is however an ongoing debate whether one should distinguish between profession and private. Tali da Silva, a Swedish cultural journalist, said during an interview with the radio channel P1 at SVT that:

“The basic principle of distinguishing between work and person is very important and something you should stick to for as long as possible. At the same time, one has to be made of stone, if one cannot imagine how horribly wrong it must feel for potential victims and/or relatives if offenders would be found guilty and at the same time as hailed on TV and radio at the national public service galas.” (SVT Nyheter 2021).

To prevent recruitment of youth into gang-related crime is one of the crime politics most important matter. This matter has resulted in a special agenda by *Regeringen* (Ministry of Justice), called the 34-point program. This program includes varying efforts to combat organized crime in Sweden (Regeringen 2020). In 2019, the Ministry of Justice released, as a part of the 34-point program, a decision consisting of cooperation between the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, the Police authority, the National Board of Institutional Care, and the National Board of Health and Welfare. These agencies and authorities were given the assignment to develop a national exit-program to strengthen society’s support for people who want to leave criminal and/or violent extremist environments and groups (Justitiedepartementet 2020).

## **1.1 Aim, research issue, and research questions**

There is no doubt that stories of violence abound in contemporary society. It is a multifaceted problem, that operates on both a societal, organizational and individual level. In order to prevent recruitment to gangs, I argue that first of all, we need to understand why this

environment is attractive for some people from the very start, and second of all, how society can improve its ability to reintegrate former gang members into society. I believe that those who possess the answers are those who are a part of the gangs. Society needs to understand which values and profits attract people to join this dangerous lifestyle. People who have gone through and lived in an environment characterized by violence, have a story that is worth listening to. Hence, I wish to conduct a study where participants of exit-programs, so to say former gang members that have made the decision to leave this lifestyle, are in the spotlight. The focus will thereby be on stories told of what I will refer to, defectors<sup>1</sup>. Defectors, and probably active gang members as well, should be interpreted as both offenders and victims. It is people that are both prone to use deadly violence, but also victims of serious crimes. This study seeks to grasp lived experiences<sup>2</sup> from gang entry and the process of exit. It further aims to explore how street culture is narrated by defectors. I have chosen to exclude “being part of a gang” in this thesis for three reasons. First of all, and most importantly, entering and leaving gangs are the two processes that interest me the most within criminological academia. Second of all, by eliminating this topic, the interviewees understood that I had no interest in talking about committed crimes and it eliminated several ethical problems. The interviewees did not risk any legal penalties by discussing the entry or exit of gangs. My final argument for leaving it out is that there already exists a lot of research and literature on both being a part of a gang and prison culture. The research questions for this thesis are therefore:

- How do defectors from gangs narrate street culture?
- How do defectors from gangs narrate their entry into gangs?
- How do they narrate leaving gangs?
- How do they narrate life without the gang?

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<sup>1</sup> Defectors will in this thesis be the equivalent to the Swedish word “avhoppare”. A defector is a person who is taking part in an exit-program. The person has belonged or had ties to a gang in such a way that it becomes difficult to leave the gang (see e.g., Brå 2016b: 21). The interviewees of this thesis are all participants of exit-programs, hence, it would be misleading to use the word “former gang member”, as not all former gang members are participating in exit-programs.

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, the term “experience” will refer to something one goes through, rather than gathered knowledge that is acquired over time. The focus is on how events are registered in the body and mind, and how the experiences occur to us here and now (see e.g., Friesen & Henriksson 2012: 1; Jackson 1996).

## **1.2 Delimitations and outline**

Local criminal networks are only a part of organized crime in Sweden. Other types of gangs that operate are for instance extremism networks, which can include right-wing ideologies or religious ideologies. Another example is self-marking groups, which in popular speech are more known as MC-gangs. These sorts of criminal activity and networks will however not be discussed in this thesis. Nor will any interviews with people who identify themselves as part of these gangs be included, since the activities in different kinds of networks or gangs differ a lot. Gang criminal activity tends to be dominated by men. This thesis will however not look into the gender aspect of gang criminality and thereby neither look into constructions of masculinities in relation to gang criminality, due to the limited space.

The thesis will be composed of six chapters. Having presented the introduction, consisting of background information and contextualized the research issue, I will continue with presenting previous research, including the two, probably, most acclaimed recent ethnographies on the topic of street culture. I will also present a pioneer's work within the Nordic countries and finally give a brief summary of exit-programs in Sweden. Followingly, I will present the theoretical framework. In this section, I will show how the Bourdieusian theoretical apparatus is applied within criminological academia and give a concise description of narrative criminology and how these theoretical concepts will be used in my analysis. Then I will present my methodological concept. The emphasis of this chapter will be on the ethical considerations, as the empiric consists of interviews with defectors. Followingly the results part is presented; the chapter is combined of the data the interviewees have contributed with and an analysis of the data. The chapter is divided into three subchapters. The first part of the chapter (5.1) focuses on three key narratives that I have identified when talking about entering gangs. The second part of the chapter (5.2) concentrates on two key narratives that I have identified when discussing leaving a gang, and the final part of the chapter (5.3) looks into two key narratives concerning life without gangs. Chapter six consists of a conclusion, where I summarize the most important findings and a final discussion.

## 2 Previous research

This chapter presents the research that the thesis relates to. I start with introducing two, probably the most recognized, works on street culture, written by Philippe Bourgois and Elijah Anderson. I will explain how they have defined street culture in their works, and how they have observed values and profits within this specific culture. I then move on to account for the history of defining gangs, and how it has been done in previous research, starting from the 1920s to today's definition. Followingly, I will present the work that Swedish authorities lay their strategies on and present Rostami et al. acclaimed work on organized crime in Sweden. Finally, I will present how exit-programs operate in Sweden.

### 2.1 Street culture

In the interface between criminology, sociology, anthropology, and ethnography, studies of street culture are emerging. Ethnographic studies have a long history in both sociology and anthropology (see e.g., Hagedorn 2008; Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003). What characterizes the mentioned works, is that the ethnographer has conducted fieldwork for several years, within the field of street and further developed "close friendly relations with drug dealers," substance abusers "and gang members" (Sandberg 2011: 48). The groups that are studied in these ethnographies are marginalized, alienated, and often engaged in criminal activities. Generally, they do not trust representatives of mainstream society and will therefore not be inclined to reveal, for instance, criminal acts to a researcher, which they do not trust, in an interview or a survey (Bourgois 2003).

"In short, how can we expect someone who specializes in mugging elderly persons to provide us with accurate data on his or her income-generating strategies? [...] Only by establishing long-term relationships based on trust can one begin to ask provocative questions, and expect thoughtful, serious answers. [...] In other words, in order to collect 'accurate data', ethnographers violate the canons of positivist research: we become intimately involved with the people we study." (ibid.: 12-13).

The probably two most acclaimed recent ethnographies on street culture, are Phillippe Bourgois' (2003) *In Search of Respect* and Elijah Anderson's (1999) *Code of the Street*. Bourgois (2003) defines street culture as:

"a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society. Street culture offers an alternative forum for autonomous personal dignity." (ibid.: 8).

Bourgois describes how the young men of his study in Harlem's street culture, started in their teens to participate in certain street economic activities with friends and older youth from

their neighborhoods (Bourgois 2003: 194-212). His data illustrates an initiation, learning about, and continuation of the street culture between the individuals. He describes how his informants have experienced structural discrimination from mainstream society, for instance when looking for a job or at their workplace. Bourgois describes the opposition that this creates, and how his informants feel disrespected and resistant when trying to integrate into mainstream society (ibid.: 137-145). The informants tell him how they in middle school accumulated street skills and cultivated street identities (ibid.: 194). Bourgois argues that the correct balance between being nice and violent is a successful competence in the economy of the street (ibid.: 82). The combination of dangerous and nice seems to be a more vital feature of street cultures. Furthermore, it is generally in this way that it is not only those who, as described above, participate in the economy of the street who welcome this balancing act, but are a general attitude among those who participate in the street culture, even those who do not operate in the street economy. Another important aspect in addition to respect, marginalized areas, and the economy of the street, is violence.

A lot of recent ethnographic work on cultures where violence is present draws on Anderson's (1999) concept *code of the street*. Anderson's study of violence in Philadelphia shows that street culture has evolved a code of the street, which he defines as:

“a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence. The rules prescribe both proper comportment and the proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so supply a rationale allowing those inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way. [...] At the heart of the code is the issue of respect – loosely defined as being treated ‘right’ or being granted one’s ‘props’ (or proper due) or the deference one deserves. [...] In the street culture, especially among young people, respect is viewed as an almost external entity, one that is hard-won but easily lost – and so must constantly be guarded. The rules of the code in fact provide a framework for negotiating respect.” (ibid.: 33).

Violence is a big part of people within the street culture, and narratives of self-experienced or fights that they have heard about or witnessed. Violence has contributed to organizing social networks and relationships within the street culture (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003; Jackson-Jacobs 2004, 2009). Within academia, stories of crime have usually been analyzed as neutralizations of crime (see e.g., Sykes & Matza 1957; Maruna & Copes 2005; Ugelvik 2012). Stories of crime also “[...] report, educate, transmit meaning, create order, construct identity, uphold culture, integrate and deal with experiences, explore taboos and entertain both storyteller and audiences” (Sandberg, Tutenges & Copes 2015: 1172).

Anderson (1999: 36) describes in his ethnographic study of street life in Philadelphia, how the young men from there imitate gangster rappers like Tupac and Snoop Dogg and are proud to

live “the thug life”. Similarly, the sociologist John Hagedorn (2008: 93) argues that the “gangsta culture” has been mass-mediated through the gangster ladder and affects the self-understanding of gang members in various parts of the world. Hagedorn’s (2008) explanation for this process is that the gang offers the members a resistant-identity, against the injustice they experience in society. Based on of the above findings, it could be added that it also offers alternative recognition criteria, learning about and legitimizing the economy of the street and that music has an impact not only on the young men’s self-understanding, but also their practice, in that they imitate the media presentations (Hayward & Young 2012: 124). As such, according to Anderson (1999), street culture is partly an adaptation or reaction to structural conditions, such as the lack of jobs, and it enables individuals living under these structural conditions to thereby gain respect, rather than through mainstream society from which they are excluded.

In previous research of young people from different marginalized areas, a central theme is the discussion of whether these youths have the ability or not to change their behavior, in relation to what is expected on the streets versus in mainstream society (see e.g., Bourgois 2003; Anderson 1999). Several ethnographic works have pointed out that respect, or in other words recognition, is central to street culture. The recognition that can be acquired in street culture is an important part of the reason for its emergence and reproduction. Anderson (1999) argues that the most important essentiality of street codes is that disrespect is met with challenge, but also that some insults need to be met with substantial and decisive violence. According to Anderson (1999), street culture arises as an opposition to exclusion, more specifically racism and economic marginalization. Furthermore, street culture offers members an arena for dignity. One must also have an understanding of this symbolic aspect of social life, which I seek to explain in a Swedish context throughout this paper.

## **2.2 Defining gangs**

Describing and classifying gangs has a rather long history with Thrasher’s (1927/1963) work, in Chicago’s gang geography during the 1920s, usually being mentioned as a milestone. According to Thrasher, gangs were established in intermediate landscapes in the city’s social ecology, where social norms and structures had not been shaped well enough. Groups of friends developed into gangs, as they felt resistance from mainstream society and ended up in conflicts with rival groups. Later ways of describing the gang’s origin and character have often returned to this reasoning, where the involvement in criminal activities has often been

added, which is an essential feature of what creates a gang. Also, several different aspects have been put forward as central to the definition work, such as what internal structure there is, what symbolism and external attributes the gang presents itself with, what economic activities create income, what duration it must have in order to use the gang name and the extent to which they relate to a specific area, a territory that gangs guard as their own (see e.g., Hagedorn 2008; Rostami et al. 2018; Sandberg & Pedersen 2011).

An internationally diversified definition has been developed by the research network Eurogang. They describe so-called “street gangs”, which have similarities to the formations that are sometimes called suburban gangs, or criminal local networks (Forkby 2008). It has been argued that the latter grouping consists of an overtime lasting, street-oriented fellowship of young people, whose involvement in criminal activities is part of their group identity (Lien 2005). In this definition, it is thus marked that the identified groups have a certain endurance. A group develops a form of collective identity that the individual members embrace. The difference to other groupings of the character peer or interest groups is that criminal acts are part of the collective identity.

### **2.3 Gangs in Sweden**

The term organized crime is frequently used, therefore depending on in which context it is used it can have several meanings. There is no adopted definition for what exemplifies gangs or the more or less organized crime that it is associated within Sweden. Associations to the mafia, MC-gangs, or local criminal networks are for instance often made, but these represent only a part of the organized crime (Brå 2016a). The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention [BRÅ] describes the phenomenon of organized crime in Sweden, as an umbrella that consists of several categories. The categories include varietal forms of networks, power structures, and criminal markets. Brå has as a consequence of this vague definition developed a description of organized crime, which is combined with research in Swedish conditions. Their definition of *organized crime* is that it is carried out by some sort of criminal group, that commits crimes to make a profit (Brå 2016a).

Today’s probably most comprehensive mapping of gangs in Sweden, is done by Rostami et al. (2018). It consists of the Swedish Police authority’s register of current individuals with some connection to organized crime and violent extremism. This mapped group has further been divided into four subgroups. Although there may be sources of error, they found just

under 5,100 individuals in the motorcycle gangs and just under 800 associated street gangs. These identified street gangs or local criminal networks had a further association to organized crime.

The identified four subgroups were:

- a. Partial organizations which had a long-standing documented crime in various constellations without constituting a formal organization for that purpose.
- b. Street gangs that were defined as self-marking with a certain territorial connection.
- c. motorcycle gangs in the so-called 1% environment<sup>3</sup>.
- d. Mafia that was distinguished by its ability to influence social institutions.

To draw sharp boundaries between different types of organizations is not always possible nor optimal. An individual can flow between groupings and the group as such can temporarily or more permanently ally itself with other constellations if it is perceived that this benefits a profit interest (Rostami et al. 2018).

Gangs seldom consist of one pure type of crime. They are operating with multi-crime, which can involve a combination of, for instance, illegal threats, threat and violence to a public servant, drug trafficking, assault crimes, robbery, perverting the course of justice, serious economic crimes such as money laundering, weapon smuggling or other serious weapons offenses, receiving, forgery, trafficking, murder and/or incitement to murder. EU Member States have agreed on eleven criteria, to facilitate the identification of organized crime (SOU 2010:15:40 ff.). Of the eleven criteria presented, at least six need to be fulfilled in order to be classified as organized crime. The bullets 1, 3, 5, and 11 have to be fulfilled.

- 1. Cooperation between more than two people.**
2. Individual assignments are assigned to each person within the gang.
- 3. Long or unlimited period of time.**
4. Some form of discipline and control.
- 5. Suspicion of serious criminal acts.**
6. Activities at a local level.
7. Use of force or other methods for threats and intimidation.
8. Use of commercial structures.
9. Participation in money laundering.
10. Improper influence on politics, media, public administration, judicial authorities, or the economy.
- 11. The pursuit of gain and/or power.**

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<sup>3</sup> “1%” is a term that has been created in response to the statement that 99% of people interested in motorcycles are law-abiding and well-behaved individuals - here the remaining percentage is found.



As portrayed, a criminal organization can be defined even by a small number of members. However, temporary associations are not included in the EU definition. In addition, crimes committed within the criminal organization must have a direct or indirect profit motive. Organized violent crimes, such as racist attacks on persons or certain crimes with political motives, are thus not included in the concept of organized crime. Hence, organized crime is defined by crimes that are carried out based on financial motives.

When the Police authority talks about organized crime, they often refer to serious crime, that is carried out systematically and in network form. However, organized crime that complies with the EU-common criteria also exists. Sweden is for instance used as a transit country for drug and tobacco smuggling. Organized crime in Sweden is mainly consisted of drug crimes, smuggling crimes, assault crimes, economic crimes, and violent crimes (Polismyndigheten 2019).

Organized crime occurs throughout Sweden but with a concentration in the country's larger cities, such as Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmo (Rikskriminalpolisen 2005). However, the development seems to include some of the country's smaller cities, especially when taking into consideration how criminal motorcycle gangs and supporter clubs have established themselves. The number of members in criminal gangs in the country seems to be increasing and the same applies to the number of groupings, although it is difficult to draw any definite conclusions from available sources (Rostami et al. 2018).

## **2.4 Exit-programs in Sweden**

In Sweden there are a number of exit-programs, which drastically can be divided into two categories, namely either they are public authority-run or non-governmental. All exit-programs are built upon the free will of the participant. The main work is aimed at supporting the defector and facilitating their reintegration into society. Generally speaking, what differs non-governmental programs from public authority-run, is that non-governmental programs are more time-consuming, and therefore able to support the clientele in also the reshaping of a life process and creating a functioning life situation. The endurance varies from nine months to three years, depending on which program one is taking part in. Some are more intensified, while others are more general, depending on the participant's needs (see e.g., Calabresi & Bobbit 1978; Kriminalvården n.d.; Forkby 2020).

The public authority-run exit-programs are mainly managed by the police and/or the social services. These programs include people who are registered in the municipality or police region where the activity is located. All authority-run programs provide the participants protection, mediate contact with, for instance, the Swedish Public Employment Service, or mediate contact with for instance psychiatry or work training. Matters concerning crime and gang affiliation are primarily limited to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service's area of responsibility (Brå 2016b: 10).

Non-governmental programs are on the other hand addressed to people across the country. In addition to convicted people, these also offer efforts to people that are identified to be at risk of developing a criminal lifestyle. However, non-governmental programs may have greater difficulties in getting the social services to finance the efforts of the participants in the program. All non-governmental programs offer one or several contact persons who act as support and coordinators in everyday life. They offer a wide range of initiatives such as practical support, conversation support, advocacy programs, supportive housing, and work training. These actors can also have their own contact areas with, for instance, the Swedish Public Employment Service or psychiatry. The workers of non-governmental programs might have a background and experience that is similar to the participants (ibid.).

### **3 Theoretical framework**

The two theories of narrative criminology and Bourdieu's theoretical framework of capital, field, and habitus are applied in this thesis in order to provide an insight into how defectors narrate street culture and their experiences of entering, leaving and living without gangs. By combining these theories, I seek to capture both how people ascribe meaning to their actions and experiences, and how they describe an embodied character of the street.

#### **3.1 Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus within criminology**

In the following section, I will present a theory that has been developed in Europe. It is based on an application of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus to street culture and has a great explanatory power for the life lived on the streets. By using this theory, it facilitates the explanation of internal processes in street culture. Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus is well suited to this, just as it is well suited to theoretically illuminate and explain the relationship between structure and culture. To understand the Bourdieusian perspective developed on street culture, I find it necessary to briefly describe the core concepts of Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus. Followingly, I will present how Bourdieusian concepts are used in street-oriented research.

Bourdieu describes society as a hierarchical social space where individuals and groups differ in structure, depending on their access to different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986). *Capital* should be understood as useful resources and means of power (Bourdieu 1984: 114), which consist of materialized or incorporated values. Capital leads to profits and can be measured by volume and interaction of capital, so to say how one owns and uses their capital. Bourdieu has distinguished three basic forms of capital. These are economic, social, and cultural capital. A fourth form of capital that is included in Bourdieu's theoretical framework is symbolic capital. It differs from the above-mentioned capitals, as it is not a capital in itself. Bourdieu rather describes it as being produced by the obtain of the other three capitals. It can for instance be measured in honor, prestige, and reputation. Symbolic capital is appreciated within a certain historical or cultural context (Bourdieu 1984). Within Bourdieu's theoretical framework he positions these different forms of capital that are obtained and used by people in relation to a specific context and social space, that he calls fields. Beyond obtaining capital, status can be generated from one's habitus. Bourdieu explains habitus as a bodily and mental disposition that is acquired through experience (Bourdieu 1996a).

Capital is used by agents who are positioned and act within arenas. Bourdieu describes arenas as social spaces, that he refers to fields. The *field* isn't an actual place, it should rather be used in a symbolic sense. It is regulated by its own silent and unspoken rules which only are applied in a specific field (Bourdieu 2005: 5; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 85; Wacquant 1998: 221). As taking part in the field, the agents, society citizens, will be influenced by it and act in a specific way within the field (Bourdieu 1996b: 232; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 88). The field is also characterized by being perceived as a battlefield, in the sense that it is a hierarchically structured space. The agents of the field maintain different positions, which are dependent on their amount of capital. Agents who have a large volume and composition of capital might challenge other agents in the field, to improve their own position and gain other rewards within the field (see Bourdieu 1996b: 232; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992).

How the agents fight each other and which strategies they use, in addition to their capital is generated by the agent's habitus. *Habitus* is to be seen as a "system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organizing principles of action" (Bourdieu 1990b: 13). According to Bourdieu, the concept of habitus can be understood as "embodied histories"; the presence of an active past which are internalized in the individual as a "second nature" (Bourdieu 1990a: 56). This "internalized system of dispositions" works in a deep, practical, and pre-reflexive way, so it becomes a part of the body, and a part of who we are (1990a: 54).

"It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practice and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms." (ibid.: 54).

Habitus is shaped by experiences. It is the social history the agents uphold, which affects their character traits. This is why previous experiences form both present and future actions (Bourdieu 1990a: 54-65). Practices can be of different nature, "as habitus is a structured principle of ingenuity, equivalent to a generative grammar that is capable of creating an infinite number of new sentences based on certain patterns and within certain limits." (Bourdieu 2008: 76).

The patterns and limits are in other words based on socially acquired arrangements, that further on structure's practice. The agent's experiences predict their view on and how to act within the field. By participating in the fight within the field over time, experience is achieved

from it, which also predicts the agent's view, evaluation, and future actions in the field, as the experiences generate in better practical understanding of how the field and the battle works (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 112). Everything is dependent on the agent's experiential arrangements, habitus, and the knowledge from the field that habitus entails. One's position in society is also dependent on the agent's capital, which determinates one's placement in the field. How capital, field, and habitus interplay, determinates how one acts or fights within the field, and also how an agent will adopt different strategies in the hierarchical fight within the field, in order to among other things improve one's status and acquire more capital and profit (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 86).

### **3.1.1 The use Bourdieu in the study of street culture**

When talking with defectors from different gangs in Sweden, who have gone through different experiences, it is unavoidable to not talk about the production of street culture. The street can be described as an alternative platform where people who do not feel that they fit in in mainstream society can build their identity and acquire recognition, but also material benefits. Theoretically, I strive to explain how the defectors narrate their experiences of street culture, and also how the defectors describe what makes the street attractive and why it turned out to be difficult to live within this environment, field. To explain this platform, I have chosen a theory that takes the internal dynamics of the gang into consideration. I will therefore use the theoretical apparatuses of Pierre Bourdieu in the street culture. The street can therefore be seen as a field where the street habitus is reproduced by different lived experiences in the field. This theoretical framework has frequently been used by researchers when analyzing street culture. As a consequence of the risen interest in using a Bourdieusian framework, contemporary criminologists are developing the Bourdieusian concepts in relation to the street.

The sociologist Sveinung Sandberg (2008: 156) argues that the presented field is characterized by "street capital". He describes it as the cultural capital of the street (*ibid.*). Street capital is defined by different kinds of skills and knowledge that are valued on the street (Sandberg & Pedersen 2011: 4, 168). It is measured by rewards, gains, profits, and sanctions, and is only validated within this certain field. These valued attributes are what differ and rank criminals in their activities and violence (Sandberg 2008: 157; Sandberg & Pedersen 2011: 168). Street capital is an overarching capital, and a core component is violence capital. Violence capital is a frequently mentioned form of capital, both within and

outside academia. The current concept that violence capital refers to was probably first introduced and used by the sociologist Diego Gambetta (2009: 82), in his theoretical analysis of prison culture. The term was used to capture the symbolic utility of violence; however, he did not define the term. In later research, researchers have tried to define what they mean when they refer to violence capital. Deirdre Caputo-Levine (2013) did a prison ethnography, where she used Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus. She describes prisons being characterized by violence capital, and refers it to the ability to use violence (ibid.: 169). In her paper, she defined it as "the ability and willingness to engage in interpersonal violence" (ibid.: 182). Another ethnographer who reflected upon violence capital is the sociologist Hakan Kalkan. In his dissertation (2018) he defines violence capital as:

"the resources, abilities, competencies and bodily and mental dispositions that are beneficial for inflicting other corporal violence or injury/pain and to a lesser extent to endure (possibly the risk of) corporal violence or injury/pain from others." (ibid.: 131).

He argues that violence capital is relative, understood in such a way that some might to a greater extent be prone and willing to inflict violence on others, as well as endure the risk of violence against themselves, than others are. Violence capital also captures to what extent some are willing to use violence, as well as how much one strives to expose others to violence and also risk being exposed to violence themselves (Kalkan 2018).

Shammas and Sandberg (2016: 195) have developed a concept they call "street field". The street field is where the actors seek out, acquire, accumulate, and use capital to acquire the benefits and profits that are valued in the street field. The field isn't an actual place, it should rather be used in a symbolic sense. This is since the field works as a reference to criminal activities, which doesn't need to be confined to the street. Values and norms that reflect on behavior and that form the street habitus are constructed through language and confirmed over and over in talk (Sandberg & Fleetwood 2017). Sandberg and Fleetwood (2017) argue that Bourdieusian tools of the street field show significance of social structure in shaping individual action, through the perception of street habitus, capital, and field.

The sociologists Sandberg and Pedersen use the term "street habitus" when they explain the street's cultural patterns (Sandberg & Pederson 2011: 34). This definition was formulated in conjunction with an ethnographic analysis of the street culture in Oslo. They have defined street habitus as "the relatively permanent and sometimes unconscious dispositions of individuals committed to street culture. It is the embodied practical sense that is seen in

hypersensitivity to offenses and frequent displays of violent potential” (ibid.). Sandberg and Pedersen (2011) argue that street habitus arises through the experiences of participation in the street culture and the socialization and habituation it entails. It must ultimately be seen as shaped by the marginalized structural position of individuals, which causes participation in the street culture (ibid.: 35; Sandberg 2008: 158).

### **3.2 Narrative criminology**

In the following section, I present the theoretical framework of narrative criminology, and shift focus on how narratives inspire and motivate harmful actions and how storytelling can make sense of experiencing violence. I will present how researchers have used narrative criminology to study occasions, settings, and processes of narrative activity among individuals involved in crime.

Narrative criminology [NC] was developed in the 2000s, aiming to contribute with a narrative perspective within criminology (Sandberg & Ugelvik 2016). Some argue that NC goes back to ancient Greek, while others claim that an alternative beginning might have been during the 50<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> century in America. At this time, narratives were analyzed as a mean of neutralization of criminal acts. The sociologists Sykes and Matza (1957) described five different techniques of neutralization, consisting of denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemned, and appeal to higher loyalties. Their analysis was built upon how offenders made their actions morally justifiable. During the late 80<sup>th</sup> and early 90<sup>th</sup> century, the sociologist Jack Katz (1988) analyzed the “seductions of crime” and argued that many crimes are motivated by their potential story, as he exemplified that criminal acts were the acting of narrative scripts. He asserted that crime is not only about economical rewards, but also emotional and social profits, that can be earned through sharing stories. Throughout his paper, he argued that people do not commit crimes only because that they are bad or evil, rather that crimes have an autotelic activity<sup>4</sup>, that people will pursue for its own sake. He suggested that the offender, like all other people, is acting consciously of “the narrative possibilities” of the criminal or deviant activity (ibid.: 321).

Lois Presser (2009) was the first to use and create the term “narrative criminology”. She has provided many developments within criminology and compiled aspects that used to be disjointed within storytelling. NC seeks to study how narratives “inspire and motivate deviant

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<sup>4</sup> An “autotelic” activity has a purpose in and not apart from itself (see e.g., Jackson-Jacobos 2013: 28).

action, and how they are used to make sense of deviance” (Presser 2009: 1). It also seeks to explore how storytelling influences both the teller and listener of the story, as for committing crimes, maintaining deviant behavior, but also how one distances themselves from crime (Sandberg & Ugelvik 2016: 129). Previous research has consisted of studying narratives of, for instance, drug dealers (Sandberg 2009), involvement within violence (Sandberg, Tutenges & Copes 2015), and terrorism (Sandberg 2013). Sandberg and Ugelvik’s work (2016) discuss several aspects that have been studied within NC. To mention a few aspects, they have for instance interpreted the relationship between neutralization techniques and Foucauldian techniques of the self, narrative resistance among prisoners, and how offenders have convinced themselves into criminal behavior. Narratives have also victims and third parties (ibid.). Hence, the term and the framework have been developed through these different publications. By dint of the frequent use of and the constant development of the term, it has been described how the study of narratives can supply fruitful angles and methods, to a nuanced analysis and conclusion.

NC is defined by Presser and Sandberg (2015: 131) as “a theoretical paradigm centered on the view that stories influence human actions and arrangements, including those that harm”. Narratives assist to place “actors and events into plots, allocate moral responsibility, causality, and agency. [...] Narratives provide exemplary models for action” (Smith 2005: 14). To do narrative criminology is to study “narrative reality,” to use Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) expression, by mapping narratives or components that turn into patterns and tendencies of crime. NC facilitates the reader’s ability to understand how people make meaning of their actions and experiences. Through NC, stories can be categorized and further guide behavior and beliefs. The word narrative in itself, as a noun or adjective, is as a rule referred to something explicitly said or written. Empirical data is therefore often based on extracts of fieldnotes, interviews, or other archived texts. However, this does not mean that narratives need to be verbalized to influence actions, narratives also:

“[...] allocate causal responsibility for action, define actors and give them motivation, indicate a trajectory of past episodes and predict consequences of future choices, suggest courses of action, confer and withdraw legitimacy, and provide social approval by aligning events with normative cultural codes.” (Smith, 2005: 18).

Narratives refer to the past, but they are adjusted to the present, more specifically to the moment of telling the story. Narratives are always drawn selectively upon lived experiences. They start and end at one point and have to emphasize specific events to make their point (Presser 2009: 179).



Narratives are embedded in storytelling situations, but as previously mentioned they emerge from and are shaped by both cultural and material structures. NC has historically focused on the storytelling of people who have been involved in or experienced crime. Storytelling can help tellers to make sense of significant events and personal experiences, which might be helpful when making decisions about whom to trust and avoid and whom to meet with suspicion (see e.g., Presser 2010; Tutenges 2013). Stories of involvement within gangs provide people with a deeper understanding of street cultural values, norms, and ideas (Sandberg 2009), but also beliefs and mindsets that are shared within a specific group (Cashman 2012: 182). Telling stories in gang environments have been outlined as a way to describe “elements of street culture” and illuminating the meaning of for instance brotherhood, respect and frauds often referred to as snitches (Lauger 2014: 2). The existing research is mainly based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, primarily focusing on the individual, so to say the offender and or victim. This individual perspective has mapped NC and headed it towards matters such as identity formation and presentation (Presser & Sandberg 2015).

By combining Bourdieusian criminology with narrative criminology, an analysis of stories told by defectors that explore values and attractions of entering a gang, but also problematic aspects of being part of a gang is offered. By using these theoretical influences, I seek to analyze the stories of the interviewees by breaking down the stories to events and circumstances the interviewees have experienced. Through looking into the stories, it enables the possibility to access the manifold lived experiences of the interviewees. As Sandberg, Tutenges and Copes (2015) have argued, values and identities are personal, but they can also shift and not go together with an eventually reconstructed identity, it is not always easy to categorize work. Since values and identities are ongoing constructions, they should be met with “continuous dialogical interpretation” (ibid.: 1171).

## **4 Methodological framework**

In this chapter, I will present the approaches that were used to collect data for this thesis and justify the use of interviews as my method. The chapter begins with a brief explanation of the selection of participants and how I gained access. Followingly, I will account for the actual data collection. Further on, I will elaborate on how the data has been analyzed, and finally, I will discuss the ethical considerations regarding this study. The population of this study is difficult to reach, as they usually live under threat and are suspicious towards strangers. Interviews with defectors were found to be the most suitable method, as this thesis seeks to explore both entry and exit from gangs, but also because by using interviews I could assure both my own and the interviewee's safety, as the interviews were held in a place that the interviewee's felt safe and undisturbed. In the ethical consideration, I reflect on both my own positionality as well as the dynamics between me and the interviewees. I also reflect on the acquired knowledge and the measures I have taken, to avoid producing troubling data. Finally, I reflect upon my interviewees' safety and how to guarantee them anonymity.

### **4.1 Selection of participants**

The material for this thesis is built upon interviews with eight participants of exit-programs around Sweden, more specifically in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmo. Coming from different cities might affect the constellation of the criminal gang. The interviews were carried out in Swedish as they took place in different cities in Sweden. A lot of the empirical material has a cultural value, and I have thereby strived to let the data speak for itself, despite translation.

The interviewees are all men, of different ages, and different ethnicities. They come from different conditions regarding housing areas, family construction, and level of educations. The age range of the interviewees varies between 20 to 38 years old. Age and maturity might affect the answers, as the interviewees might perceive their previous life choices differently, depending on how much they have worked with themselves, and for how long they have been apart from the gang and street culture. An important perspective that needs to be highlighted is that the interviewees are at a life stage where they have decided to leave their criminal lifestyles and start a new life. This speaks for the possibility that answers might differ from other members of gangs. The interviewees of this thesis do thereby not represent all members of gangs. In 2010 Lois Presser conducted a study based on interviews in prisons, which she

found to be significantly formed by the storytelling of her male interviewees. She perceived the imprisoned context to be characterized by the inmates trying to control the interview-situation, as they are not able to control their freedom (Presser 2010: 442). Another narrative criminologist, Jennifer Fleetwood (2014), carried out ethnographic interviews over a 16-months in Ecuadorian prisons. She highlighted the significance of patiently building trust with the interviewees or informants, as she argues that the data alone might leave out “the particular narrative forms common in prisons” (ibid.: 27). She also argues that research among offenders, both inside and outside prison might at times be “exhausting” (ibid.: 11). However, there are several advantages of doing in-depth research among this population, in contrast to quantitative studies, as this perspective facilitates the embodied engagement and understanding of other people’s situation (see e.g., Tutenges 2019). Within the Nordic countries, there are not that many qualitative studies on explanations to entry and exit of gangs.

Exit-programs in Sweden are voluntary, which I believe speaks for the possibility of the defectors wanting to contribute to research, as they already have come to the turning point of their life and decided to leave their gang. There are no records of who is participating in exit-programs in Sweden, hence, should not the interviewees be at risk of exposing themselves by participating in this study. The participants of public authority-run programs can be found in the criminal record, but convicts with ongoing probation were over 10 000 in Sweden in 2018 (Kriminalvården 2019), which should complicate the possibility for an outstanding to figure out who the respondents are in this study.

Including this population in my thesis will offer a nuanced analysis of both wanting to be included and excluded from a gang and the street culture. However, the answers are not representative for all defectors nor all active members of gangs. If I had interviewed active members of gangs the answers would most likely differ a lot. Choosing these interviewees contributed with deep reflections of both entering and leaving the field. I believe that defectors are a suitable group of interviewees, as they have started to both process and deal with choices they have made previously in their lives, but also thoughts and actions they need to handle with today. When reaching out to the interviewees, I initially contacted moderators of different exit-programs. I told them about my thesis, and asked them to talk with potential participants that could be willing to participate in interviews with me. I clarified that committed crimes are not the focus of my study, but the lived experiences that the defectors

believe have been of importance, when talking about their lives, and how it turned out as it did. I also informed about the purpose of this study and how anonymity will be guaranteed. I finally gave them my name and number for further questions and obtained consent to participate in my study. Initially, all contact was going through the moderator, in order to make the potential interviewees comfortable, but also to guarantee my own safety and ensuring that the eventual interviewee had understood the purpose of my study.

## **4.2 Data collection**

To fulfill this thesis purpose and answering questions about how defectors narrate street culture and how they experience entering, leaving, and living without gangs, semi-structured interviews were found to be the most suitable method. The purpose of this thesis is to describe, explain and interpret lived experiences and experiences from here and now, among this specific population. The thesis is departing from a strive of analyzing the experiences the defectors have gone through as an organized context, as well as interaction with significance for these men's entry and exit process. I aimed to gain knowledge about them as individuals and group members, and about their environment and context at different times. The thesis mindset is characterized by the thought that reality can be perceived in many ways, and that there is not one absolute truth. Interviews with defectors were found to be the most suitable method, as this thesis seeks to explore both entry and exit from gangs. By using interviews, I could guarantee that the intended topic was to be discussed. One of my main requirements for this thesis, was that the participants need to feel safe when telling their stories. The interviews were held at a place where the interviewees felt calm and safe. They could tell their stories without being disturbed or interrupted.

As previously mentioned, the interviewees received information about the study before the interview started, through the moderators and with me also, if desired. I emphasized that the interview was voluntary, that they could interrupt the interview at any time, and that they did not have to answer questions that they perceived as uncomfortable or otherwise difficult. I also informed them that even after the actual interview they could withdraw their participation, without further motivation. I clarified that the aim of this thesis is not to investigate crime, but an attempt of understanding how street culture affects someone who is part of it. My impression was that the interviewees were sincerely interested in participating, and many wanted to tell their life-story. During the interviews, the interviewees were given a lot of space to formulate themselves, identify problems and think about different actions and

consequences. The interviewees were allowed to steer the conversation and talk about topics they found relevant. The purpose of the carried-out interviews was to grasp the interviewees' view on their reality, and therefore I strived to let them talk as much as possible, without being steered by me, the interviewer (see e.g., Kvale 2006: 844-845). As the interviewees talked about their lived experiences, the interviews contained elements of a more thematic nature, such as identity and feeling a sense of belonging. I was able to follow up on answers when I wanted the interviewee to further develop some reasonings. Each interview also provided increased knowledge about different themes, which I then highlighted in future interviews to agree on how the person in question thought about these matters. The interviews followed a general interview guide, but the interviewees were free to follow up on themes that emerged in the course of the interviews.

During the interviews with the defectors, I asked the person in front of me to retell lived experiences in his life in the way he wanted. Stories about different significant events and possible explanatory matters for their lives turning out as they did were discussed. In studies of crime, stories are exceptionally important as the studied phenomenon is rather difficult to observe first-hand (Sandberg, Tutenges & Copes 2015). However, an important aspect, especially when carrying out interviews, is that narratives are not only about presenting oneself. Narratives interplay with the audience (see e.g., Presser 2005). How listeners interact with the stories affect the storyteller, interviewees might for instance structure their stories to achieve empathy or acceptance from the listener (Presser 2005). Narratives might enable embodied understandings of different activities in their cultural context (Tutenges 2019).

By using a life course perspective, an attempt of presenting an in-depth and multifaceted story of how these men at an early stage of life got involved in criminal environments, but also what it was like being part of a gang and how the exit-process has been shaped, was made. To facilitate the beginnings of the interviews, I could ask about things like growing up, family conditions, how school was, friendships, when and how they came in contact with authorities, and about different turning points. My interview guide also included some bullets concerning phases and conditions specifically related to the exit-process, such as how they reached out for help and how their lives today differ from the time they were an active gang member. Once again, I emphasized that their criminal activity was not the focus, but experiences of important events that might explain how and why they entered a gang, and further on in the interview, how their exit-process was formed. It was important to make the transitions

between the question areas as natural as possible. Topics such as social relations, violence, access to material and symbolic resources, identity, and status emerged. The questions were posed with everyday language and adapted to the individual's expressions and conditions. The interviewee's vocabulary was also of importance, whereby I followed up on what the interviewees meant when using different words or describing some concepts. How people narrate, gesticulate, and listen varies among different cultures. Meanings of stories or words also differ remarkably in different contexts (Polletta 2006: 167).

Some interviews took place in several rounds, in order not to exhaust the interviewees, nor to affect their mental state, as the topics discussed tend to be perceived mentally stressful, while others were carried out in one round, as long as the interviewees felt comfortable and mentally stable. I have chosen not to discuss being part of a gang in an own chapter, since the interviewees felt uncomfortable talking about this time of their lives. Many of the interviewees indicate that they have not been convicted for all crimes they have committed. Talking about this time might lead to them mistakenly tell something that could lead to legal consequences. Another reason for leaving out the discussions about being a part of a gang was that many of the interviewees have witnessed serious violence, one could even call it executions. These events have in the worst cases resulting in diagnoses like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other mental illnesses, often characterized by anxiety or paranoia. I decided that these kinds of themes are not suitable within this paper, at least not on a deeper level than what the interviewees feel comfortable talking about.

The interviews took place in a place where the interviewees felt comfortable, primarily a place connected to the local where the exit-program was carried out. However, some of the interviewees did not want the interviews to be associated with that place. During the interviews I took notes, as all the interviewees did not feel comfortable with being on record. Some of the interviewees still live under threat and some of them have protected identities. This is another indication that interviews are preferable over other methods, as ethnographic fieldwork. Regarding the timeframe, interviews are a more time-effective method, as fieldwork would require entering the field, becoming a part of the field, building trust with the respondents. All three stages are time-consuming phases. Interviews will probably generate more compressed data during a shorter amount of time. However, ethnographic fieldwork would obviously produce more contextualized and nuanced data, and is a preferable method in that aspect. Still, I believe that interviews are a more suitable method, as they took place at

a given time in a given space, thereby I could assure that the intended topic was discussed. From a security perspective, interviews are to prefer since they were conducted under controlled circumstances. Entering the field would in this case eventually lead to many exposed situations and the possibility for taking part in criminal activities or at least observing these is high. Conducting interviews was still not totally free from complications, which I will discuss further in the ethics section.

### **4.3 Analyzing data**

The empirical data is based on the experiences of the interviewees. However, I am aware that as an interpreter of the data, I will pick and choose which stories to present and analyze. We select which stories to highlight when presenting, interpreting, and evaluating data (see Sandberg, Tutenges & Copes 2015). Another perspective I reflected upon during the analysis was the interviewees' purpose of sharing a specific story. Researchers have argued that people might do deviant things to make a good story (see e.g., Tutenges & Sandberg 2013). The sociologist Curtis Jackson-Jacobs, who studied the social organization of fights (2009), argued that "When people fight, they often do things to make good storytelling details. They perform for future storytellers, for present audiences, and also for themselves, appreciating their own conduct much as audiences do." (ibid.: 177).

The material has been analyzed in different steps using a thematic analysis. The analysis involved a step-by-step process, where the interviews were first read carefully and on several occasions. Through this reading, an overall idea was created about what seemed to be important phases of life such as entering, leaving, and living without the gang. The following step was to create more concentrated compilations of each interview, each of which contained information about these phases of life. This meant a form of construction of the life story to make it easier to see general patterns and the more unusual life paths, trajectories. Each construction also involved an interpretive work, purely in general, to be able to see connections and patterns in the material, and more specifically related primarily to the study's focus on experiences.

Further on, I started to analyze the material in relation to the theoretical aspects, narrative criminology and the use of Bourdieu in street culture, and how these were shown at different life stages. For this analysis, the program N'Vivo version 12 was used. The program facilitated the coding of the material, that is, the process different text sections are provided

with a designation. Codes were used to find a direction in the material. To start with, I went through the material and tried to organize it, in order to make sense to me. Then I started to link the data, followed by linking different codes to each other. I found the program as a valuable tool to create an overview of comprehensive empirical material. During the first cycle of coding, I both lumped the codes, bundled them up into bigger categories, but I also used splitter coding, and divided the data into smaller coded moments. I tried to make easily accessible codes by trying to find a name for the code, characterized by what the code meant to me and grasping the essence of the sentence. The codes were then put into one big document, which I read through, highlighted different sections, and started looking for similarities and differences.

I started with the second cycle of coding when my data was coded in a way that I could capture and have an overview of the quotes. Then, I started to compare the codes, to find patterns. The analysis continued by identifying common features within the different themes. Key narratives were crystallized, concerning the entry, exit and life without gangs. Brotherhood and identity appeared for instance to be a central part of the interviewees' experiences.

#### **4.4 Ethical considerations**

Ethical reflections took a big part in this thesis. In-depth interviews regarding the topic of entering, leaving, and a life without gangs within the presented environment involving young men and their lived experiences are naturally imbued with ethical issues. Many interviewees of this study live in an environment that is marginalized, stigmatized, and therefore move with despised individuals by mainstream society. Some of them are socially vulnerable people and part of ethnoracial minorities. It is also interviewees who are or have been involved in criminal activities, which are often seen as immoral actions by mainstream society. These conditions pose several ethical dilemmas when conducting interviews. These dilemmas are too extensive to go through one by one. Instead, I will in the following subheadings discuss the most important overall ethical issues; "Dynamics between interviewer and interviewees", "The interviewees and the acquired knowledge", and finally "Protecting the interviewees". This study has followed the Swedish Research Councils' four main requirements concerning research ethics, which are reliability, honesty, respect, and responsibility (Swedish Research Council 2002).



#### **4.4.1 Dynamics between interviewer and interviewees**

The relational ethics relate to aspects of my behavior and approach when doing the interviews. I tried not to do or say things that might seem judgmental or disrespectful to the interviewees. One aspect of this relational ethic could be to suppress or not accentuate features of myself that could be interpreted as a form of pride that I had a different social position than them. I told the interviewees about my profession, that I work as a probation officer in Stockholm. I clarified that the conducted interviews, would have nothing to do with my profession, but only be used for my thesis. I informed the interviewees that I would not go through their criminal record, nor look up when they debuted in crime or where they live. I told them that the only data that will be interpreted in this thesis, is the one they contribute with during the interview. Before starting the interviews, I informed the interviewees that they only answer the questions they feel comfortable talking about, and that they do not have to further develop any answer if they do not want to. This was an important aspect to me, since many of the interviewees live under serious threats, possibly with a price on their heads. Some of them have gone through tough life stages, as for instance having friends or family members being killed. The interviews were carried out on the interviewees' premises, meaning that some interviewees participated in two or three interview sessions, while others participated only once. All interviews were carried out face to face, in a place where the interviewee felt comfortable. Some interviewees did not want the interview to be recorded, for reasonable reasons, such as reminds of police interrogations or fear of having their voice on a tape.

#### **4.4.2 The interviewees and the acquired knowledge**

My main concerns were both regarding the individual protection and safety of my interviewees, and the psychological risk of sharing these stories. The topics discussed are personal and the interviewees who participated in this study gave a lot of themselves. One issue is the principle of ensuring that conducted study will not harm the participants (see Madden 2010: 88-91). Violence and other activities that are occurrent within this milieu, and perceived as deviant by mainstream society, render in ethical matters as carrying out interviews. Some of the interviewees had current contacts with people with ongoing crime and great potential for violence. The interviewees might have been involved in various forms of illegal activities and violent situations. As previously mentioned, before starting the interviews, I clarified that I do not want to discuss any crimes that they were not convicted of nor any information that they judged to be sensitive. I did this demarcation to avoid further

consequences that could emerge if I took part in this kind of information, as me having to report them and share my knowledge with various authorities. This would also be weird since the interviewees tend to live within a culture where people seldomly report each other (see e.g., Kalkan 2018). The risk that the individual would provide potentially harmful information was necessary to prevent.

#### **4.4.3 Protecting the interviewees**

When studies explore topics that concern experiences of crime, it may lead to long prison sentences, which exacerbates the ethical dilemma. To ensure that my study would not cause any harm to my interviewees, I have used anonymization in my methodology. Additional measures were also made to make identification impossible, such as excluding names of groupings and the secrecy of geographical areas. These precautions were done to ensure that it is not possible to compile information about the interviewees and to ensure that the interviewees cannot be deduced from the data they have contributed with. The interviewees are presented with a designation, meaning I made up names for the interviewees, and each time quotations are presented, I will use a different name in order to further reduce the risk that someone could become identifiable by adding different information together. This might complicate the reader's ability to get to know my interviewees and relate to their stories. This is a consideration I have thought through, and I have chosen to prioritize the anonymity of my interviewees above the reader's need to get to know the presented person. However, I will try to compensate for this delimitation with long quotations from the interviews. I believe that this will facilitate bringing the reader closer to both the experiences and senses of my interviewees. This will also benefit the cultural value of the results part, as it will be built upon the interviewee's own words and expressions. Jackson (1996) wrote in an article about phenomenological anthropology, that a detailed portrayal of "lived reality" is a strategy to avoid the "estranging effects of conceptual models and systematic explanation which, when pushed too far, disqualify the efface the very life one wants to understand, and isolate us from the very life we have to live" (Jackson 1996: 2).

Several of the interviewees could also be assumed to be in vulnerable situations, as they were in a clear life-changing process. I had in mind that they could carry on several difficult experiences and could be in a socially problematic situation. Therefore, I worked especially hard with creating a safe atmosphere during the interview-situations. I provided my interviewees with initial information and repeatedly reminded them of the possibility of

refraining from entering into questions that were perceived as sensitive or difficult to discuss. At the end of the interview, I asked if there was anything during the interview that the interviewee perceived as tough or difficult. If necessary, I had prepared to provide information about contacts in public care. However, this need never emerged. Surprisingly, many interviewees expressed that they had reflected upon important things during the interview, topics that they previously had tried not to deal with, and pointed out that they wanted to share their experiences so that others would not choose the same path as they did.

## 5 Results

This chapter is a combination of the stories of the defectors and an analysis of the empirical material they have contributed with. This chapter will be built upon three subchapters, which are: entering gangs, leaving gangs, and life without gangs. In each subchapter, I will account for the identified key narratives from the interviewees' stories. The identified narratives represent the experiences that may have influenced the entry and exit processes. The narratives might also circulate and affect each other. The experiences of the interviewees are varied, which is why we need to hear their stories, as there is not one explanation for the entry or exit of gangs. The chosen names for these narratives are defined to the kind of message they convey.

### 5.1 Entering gangs

In the following subchapter, I will present the process of how my interviewees explain their path into crime and discuss it departing from three key narratives, that were identified when narrating entry into gangs. These are inequality narratives, brotherhood narratives, and violent narratives. Steps that together framed the entry process varied somehow among the interviewees. The way into crime-related activities might have depended on a specific event or specific course of events, during the interviewees' youth and beginning of their adult life.

#### 5.1.1 Inadequate narratives

The feeling of inadequacy, exclusion, and not being enough was something many interviewees talked about. These feelings could take shape in different situations, for instance within the school environment or at home. Together these feelings formed a process that is part of a narrative that I have termed the *inadequate narrative*.

Two interviewees told me about how they started going to school in a "rich" area, which made them targets for bullying, as they did not fit in with the other kids. Benjamin was a victim of racism, his family lived in an area where there was only one other family with an immigrant background. He had a lot of trouble in school with the other kids, which made his family decide on moving to a less fancy area, hoping that he wouldn't feel exposed or excluded anymore. Another interviewee, Oscar, also talked about not fitting in at his school, due to his clothes and his height, which he describes as the beginning of his involvement in violence. At this time, he was eight years old, and he describes this period as characterized by

anger and being ashamed. Feeling inadequate could also take place within the family, at home. Akif describes his upbringing as tangled and problematic.

Akif: “My tangled upbringing at home led to school not going so well for me. But I made sure that my siblings were well and attended school. I was very concerned about protecting others, I guess it had to do with the fact that I could not protect my mother from our stepdad. My self-confidence took a beating there.”

The interviewees reflected upon the lived experiences from this time, and depending on their age and time within the exit-process, they had different abilities to reflect on both others’ contribution, but also their own role on how and why previous events led them to what Shamma and Sandberg (2016: 195) call the “street field”. These experiences from their childhood and early adolescence might have been their first step of their path into crime. The narratives referred to their childhood but were adjusted to today’s light, a typical tool when storytelling (Presser 2009: 179). Among the interviewees, troubled family life and failures in school created a life situation, where the search for alternative solutions, brought kids and youths in similar life situations from the same neighborhood together. Unifying among the interviewees was that when they felt inadequate or excluded from an environment that should symbolize safety during one’s childhood, such as at home or school, they found trust and appreciation on the street instead. The street (*the field*) became a place where Benjamin, Oscar, and Akif started to obtain and accumulate street capital. Street capital should in this sense be seen as varietal skills and knowledge that is appreciated on the street (see e.g., Sandberg 2008; Sandberg & Pedersen 2011). They became acknowledged by different rewards and gains and started to create a reputation for themselves. There was finally something they were good at, that nobody could take away from them. They had earned their place on the street. The interviewees told me how they strived for values that they were able to achieve and fulfill. By telling their stories to me, with their own words and language, they described the street habitus they had taken part in (see Sandberg & Fleetwood 2017). Finding an alternative arena, street field, was also about gaining respect. Bourgois (2003: 8) has described in his work how the street culture is “emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society. Street culture offers an alternative forum for autonomous personal dignity.”

### **5.1.2 Brotherhood narratives**

The stories of brotherhood were often shaped by joy and a feeling of a sense of belonging and acceptance, whether it was who they were or what they looked like, such as their height or what skin color they had. As Bourgois (2003) argued, recognition is fundamental within street

culture, and the street culture is an alternative offer to personal dignity. Motives such as anxiety, loneliness, and on the contrary the search for friendship, brotherhood, and the opportunity to earn easy money and having an exciting and action-filled life, were influencing motives to become a member of a gang in this study. Similar to Hagedorn's (2008) argument, the gang offered the member a resistant-identity, as well as learning about and legitimizing the economy of the street.

During their time within the street field, most of the interviewees, at least initially, felt appreciated and were able to realize themselves differently than before. Additionally, they received easy money, status, and protection if needed. Status, money, and people holding one's back are additional symbolic capitals within this context (see Bourdieu 1984). Money, status, and loyal friends are important for many people even outside the street, but how these attributes take shape within the street culture, differs somehow from mainstream society, which is why I refer them to street capitals (see Sandberg 2008). On the street, most business is based on criminal activities, and as Lien (2005) have argued, involvement in criminal activities within a gang that consist of a street-oriented friendship of young people creates a group identity. This group identity defines who they are and is in constant interaction with their habitus, which is characterized by values and norms that reflect on their behavior (see Shammas & Sandberg 2016).

A reoccurring topic among all the interviewees, when talking about the path into crime, was feeling accepted and important. These feelings were dependent on having supportive and like-minded friends, who had experienced similar conditions as themselves during their childhood. They also happened to be from the same area. Many interviewees illustrate that it all started as a game, them playing around and having fun with their friends. At this time, they were all at an early stage of being a teenager, around 12-15 years old. They did not realize that this was the beginning of their criminal career.

Bashir: "I had a lot of friends and different buddies, I probably hung out with the ones who were the most troubled. [...] I wouldn't say that we were a gang, we were only friends from the same area. Everyone bought (referring to drugs) from the same group. My friends became everything to me, who I was on the street defined me as a person, there I had my identity. I felt a sense of belonging. [...] We were the same age and were the worst in this area, so the result was that all idiots were gathered and hung out together. Birds of a feather stick together, isn't that how it's said?"

Abdi had a similar experience of defining gangs. He was quite frustrated when talking about how mainstream society and the judicial system try to categorize criminals.

Abdi: “No, it’s not like there are a bunch of gangs, I mean the court writes in the verdict about networks here and there. To me, it’s my childhood friends. But nowadays, as soon as you are with your friends, you are classified as a network or a gang.”.

Likenesses can be drawn to how Thrasher (1927/1963) already in the 1920s started defining the complicated description of gangs. He wrote about groups of friends who developed into gangs, when they did not fit in in mainstream society. During the interviews the men talked about how violence started to take place within the circle of friends, and that they had to fight their enemies. Some of them started fighting in order to give again to the ones that had excluded and bullied them when they were younger.

Adnan talks about this period with a twinkle in his eyes and describes a time when he fought a lot, mainly with older and bigger boys, and he loved it. There finally was something Adnan felt he was better at than the other kids. He describes himself as boundless. Jackson-Jacobs (2009, 2004) has studied the social organization of fights, where he argues that fights are not only about showing you physical strength, but also to make a good story so as to appreciate their own contribution to the fight. Katz (1988) also claimed that stories might be used to build an identity about being a dangerous and tough man. The argument that people do deviant things to make a good story is further strengthened by other storytelling researchers (see e.g., Tutenges & Sandberg 2013). Adnan’s ability to fight made him stand out and made the street an attractive place for him. It was both rewarding for him, as he earned recognition among friends and enemies, but he could also be happy with his own input. Anderson (1999) has described street culture as a place filled with rules that define both how to behave and how to react when being challenged. Adnan both demonstrated and defended his pride, in parallel as his violence capital grew. His violence capital was strengthened as he showed both ability and willingness to fight (see e.g., Caputo-Levine 2013; Kalkan 2018).

Jamal says that he sought his way to the street in order not to deal with the issues at home. He could escape from his reality, when he was out on the street, with his friends. Jamal describes his character on the street as an outspoken and unpredictable person. In conjunction with hanging out with their friends on the street, and being involved in crime and violence, all interviewees describe that violence and the seriousness of crimes quickly escalated. They had to be “the best at it”. Many of these men had relatively early in their lives created a reputation for themselves, a name on the street. This is an important form of street capital, as one needs to be updated on who is big enough to control one’s enemies, competitors or partners (see

e.g., Sandberg 2008). This also shows what Lauger (2014: 2) refers to as “elements of street culture” as the significance of respect and fraud is portrayed.

### **5.1.3 Violent narratives**

Among the interviewees, violence was a way of expressing the anger, disappointment, and exclusion they had created earlier in life, due to their frustrating childhood. The fights in adolescence seemed more like an exciting and fun pastime. Growing in age, however, resulted in different kinds of sanctions, such as care of youth or some kind of contact with social services. If it wasn't the interviewees themselves who were institutionalized, it was their close friends. During my interview with Hassan, he told me that he was convicted for the first time when he was 15 years old, and that everything after that escalated quickly. He describes a time when he committed crimes for financial reasons, but also because he was a thrill. As Katz (1988) argued, people do not commit crimes because they are bad, the crime might be committed for its own sake. Hassan describes himself during this time of his life as being very unstable and that he lashed out quickly. He had a “short fuse” and got easily irritated or angry, which resulted in being impulsive and truculent. Adam describes his time in the care of youth as quite meaningless, and rather having the opposite effect on him than what he was placed in there for.

Adam: “Initially I was placed there for three months, but I ended up staying for two years. [...] Then I was discharged due to threats and quarrels. I find this quite strange, because that's exactly what you should work with, in there? [...] But now afterward, I can say that the only thing we did in there was to trigger each other, no one got better in there or calmed down.”

The care of youth became an arena for the young men, as they taught each other how to fight, but also how to improve their status and street capital in general, but mainly their violence capital. The interviewees tell how the most efficient way to create a reputation was through violence. Regardless of the feelings that might have evoked from using violence, the capacity for violence was an important element in asserting one's status, reputation and strengthening their identity, “to be someone”. How the interviewees describe this process goes hand in hand with how Anderson (1999) described “the code of the street”, but also how he uses the term “juice”, which is revealed to discourage disrespect and keeping their status (ibid.: 33, 73). The interviewees however clarified to me that this was not enough. They explained that they constantly had to level up in order to remain respected. Jack describes the necessity of stepping up followingly,



Jack: “You start thinking about how to scare people, you do not only hurt them, you want everyone who watches to know what you are capable of, so that they won’t start messing with you. I mean it’s not like these gangs are an army, we are usually talking about three to four people. A suburb can have several thousand criminals, you cannot control them if they aren’t terrified. That’s the only thing that scares these people, frightening them, so that they stay out of your area. It’s the only thing that works, because the only thing you can take for granted is that these people value their own lives, and will try to stay alive. [...] I was about 20 years when things were getting rough. There was quite a lot of jealousy among us. Everyone wanted to be THE GUY, you know. Between us, it was a tough competition. [...] But then the thing is this, crime is one way to take, but it has a high price and not everyone fixes it. Crime and (drug)addiction isn’t a place to go, if you are only in it for fun. You cannot reflect upon the shit you do, neither be emotional about it. Then you won’t last. If you enter to make money, it’s another thing. Then you can handle it. That wasn’t my case, I only wanted to have fun, so it was a waste of time and dangerous for me to keep on. There are simpler things to do to amuse yourself. But I did not realize that back then.”.

People on the street are very risk-taking. It seems like it is almost accepted that you either die for the gang or end up in prison. The people of the street seem to try to reach the top as quickly as possible, and have as much fun as possible, to maximize the effect of being a gang member. It appears like members of gangs have to make a decision where they can either choose to have a short and colorful life or a long and gray one.

As the interviewees have told, the violence becomes more comprehensive the deeper into the gang one comes. It seems to be part of the street’s cultural patterns, and reminds of how Sandberg & Pedersen’s (2011) explained how people commit to street culture. It becomes an embodied sense which often is shown through violent actions. Violence is not automatically a part of the street. When competing with others, usually on the drug market, the gangs need to use violence to both control other rival gangs, but also control the internal process within a gang, so that nobody takes a slip, as a rule. It seems like violence is not only a mean for threatening rival gangs, but also a part of disciplining the members of the own gang. This is something that affects the individual gang member. Violence provides the gang members to organize their social networks and relationships within the street culture (see e.g., Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003). Eventually, one won’t know if they can trust anyone outside nor inside the gang. During my interview with Simon, we started talking about what characterizes a good criminal.

Simon: “I think those who are the best criminals are those who have it within their family. There someone is above them and tell them how things work and how to deal with money, what will happen with their friends, and they usually have close core family and are close with their relatives. It goes on for generations and goes around all the time, while those who enter and leave local criminal networks are struggling with getting anything out of it. Especially in Sweden. Here you do it only to have fun. You know, no one is starving here, there isn’t poverty in Sweden. Violence is a huge part of this life. If you’re not ready to be brutally violent you will be eaten up. It was one of the things that made me manage at an early age, it was not that I was stronger than everyone else, I had easily been beaten, but everyone was scared of me. You have to constantly remind your enemies not to mess with you. People will come after you and they will try to kill you. It’s tough you know, it’s one of the things that mentally consume you. The violence has to be rougher and rougher and eventually you lose yourself, completely. It cannot be worse than that. People who think they can do it without violence, I mean no you cannot

do it without violence. It's just, they get hold of you, when they get the smell that there is money, they will take you. No one will feel sorry for you, no one will think 'but he is a good person'. No way! They won't give a fuck; they do not care. They just want to know if they can do it or not. No matter if someone is a good person. The only thing that matters is violence capital.”.

In Sandberg's (2008) research among drug dealers in Norway, he discusses the importance and use of violence in a similar way as Simon did. He concluded that disrespect was an important matter to deal with if one's status was threatened. To maintain one's status and further develop it was through violent acts, but also to retell other's stories of fights. Researchers from different traditions tend to emphasize and interpret different stories according to their own theoretical standpoints. As Simon presented, stories of violence serve several purposes. Stories of violence do multiple narrative works, and cross different fashions and theories (Sandberg, Tutenges & Copes 2015).

## **5. 2 Leaving gangs**

Narratives about leaving gangs emerged as we continued talking about the lived experiences of the interviewees. In this subchapter, I will present the empowering and facilitating aspects the interviewees faced, when taking the decision upon leaving the gang, but also how building a new life and creating a new identity has turned out for them. Identity work has taken a big part in the interviewees' lives, when deciding to leave the gangs. A big part of their previous identity was associated with the gang. This process is quite difficult to handle on your own. Some of the interviewees started the process of leaving gangs several years ago, while others still are in the middle of the process and may be more ambivalent. Reasons behind deciding to leave the street culture varies among the interviewees, as they have experienced different vital events in their lives, which I will refer to as turning points. The narratives I will present in this chapter are turning point narratives and identity narratives.

### **5.2.1 Turning point narratives**

The interviewees had been part of the street culture for a long time, to be more precise from nine to twenty years. The long stay was partly due to them finding something at the street, that they had not been able to achieve outside its field. Initially, as I have accounted for in the previous subchapter, their lives were, among other things, about creating and maintaining a street identity and strengthening their status. Problems that emerged and contributed to thoughts of exiting was, in particular, the violence they used themselves, but also witnessed. Another aspect was the disappointment they felt in their so-called brothers, as they

experienced that they had been exploited and later realized that this “brotherhood” and fellowship was nothing more but a façade. Even if they had entered the street as resistance to mainstream society, by not wanting to accept its’ values and mindsets, the interviewees clarified through their stories that the street did not offer them what they were looking for. How the interviewees saw themselves and their role within the street field changed as they grew older, saw friends get hurt, in combination with thoughts about their own future. Their narratives, especially the “self-narratives” changed as we started talking about the turning points (see Presser 2009). Sebastian told me about how losing his best friend made him decide to give an exit-program a chance.

Sebastian: “I saw my best friend die [...]. At this point, I was high on all drugs you can imagine. [...] After this adventure, I came in contact with the social services and their exit-program. They could offer me a place in another city in the country and I thought ‘well I’m going, I have to get out of this place’. During my first meeting with the exit-program, the boss of the program came towards me and pat me on the back. I was wearing a bulletproof vest. Obviously, he noticed it and asked me if people knew where I was. I tried to talk my way out of it and not make a deal of it. I had done some business (referring to criminal activity) right before entering the venue where the exit-meeting was held. [...] At last, I ended up leaving the city and went to a treatment center, but it only lasted for three months, until I threatened the personnel. This is how I was used to handling setbacks. Then I had to go back home again. But I was ambivalent the first time I came in contact with the exit-program. I don’t think I was ready or responsive to help yet.”

The way Sebastian told me about this episode of his life, shows that he has gone through a lot of pain, and that he still was a lost boy at this time, who despite his status and street capital, still did not know who he was. During the interview, he was able to, in a humble way, reflect upon this time and admit that he was not mature enough or ready for help. He did not know where he belonged or what kind of life he wanted to live. Another interviewee, Damir, says that his process of leaving started when he got arrested for the crime he now serves. He talks about this event followingly,

Damir: “When I got in prison, I thought about all the injuries I got, and you know I could just as easily have been dead. [...] It’s not like I was forced into crime, but it wasn’t completely of free will either. [...] While I was serving my time, I decided to leave this, but of course, I had thought about it before. I thought to myself, ‘what do I lose by doing it when I get out, I’ll just do it (leave)’. So, when I came out, I just left, I tried my way out and here I am now. It’s the best thing I’ve done in my life (haha). However, I don’t regret anything in my life, believe that there is a meaning to everything. [...] If I had stayed within the gang, it wouldn’t have ended well; I had not gotten anywhere with my life. [...] You won’t get shit of being in prison, it only hurts you.”

All the interviewees had at some point in their lives spent time in prison, some of them several times and for many years. Occasional shorter sentences were perceived by many interviewees as a good opportunity for rest, but also as an opportunity to create important new contacts and knowledge within the criminal field. In previous research about prison culture (see e.g., Gambetta 2009; Caputo-Levine 2013; Presser 2010, 2005; Fleetwood 2014) both

violence capital has been studied, but also how inmates have told their stories. Some findings that Presser (2010, 2005) did was that the inmates tried to control the situation, and that they tried to achieve certain effects from her, the interviewer. The interviews I have carried out are, however, with defectors, which may explain why my interpretation of the interviewees differs so much from the findings that Presser did. I spoke with men, who could look back at their time in prison, as well as the time before being sentenced to prison, and show me a vulnerable, open, and genuine side of them, where they could tell me how they acted during their time in prison. Some of the interviewees confirmed that prison is a place where you influence and get influenced by others' street capital. For instance, being placed in a high-security prison would enhance one's violence capital and help one creating a viable name. The prison was also an arena to strengthen and create new connections to gangs and criminal lives. At the same time, some interviewees used their time in prison to do the opposite, namely, to re-evaluate their lives and involvement in their gang. Many interviewees seem to have reflected upon what to do with their time in prison. Dejan describes his time in prison followingly,

Dejan: "I have been serving a long sentence and thought it would be just as well for me to do something with the years I spend in prison. I was, for the first time ever, honest with myself and realized that I need to work with myself within several areas, mainly with anger management and my impulses. I wanted to change and be a better person, but I felt that I needed guidance on how to proceed. My goals were to have a stable life, to feel good about myself, but also to be a good and present family member. I was open, sincere, and honest. I worked with changing my thought patterns regarding attitudes and values that justify crime, but I also worked with my self-control. [...] Kids and family have always been the most important thing. \*Stumbles\* I was in prison when my first child was born. I missed it. My wife... \*stops talking\*. \*Takes a deep breath\*. You know I want to be free and own my time, I feel bad when I'm not with my family."

The dream and longing of having an own family, being responsible, and taking care of children was a re-occurrent. Having an own family seemed to symbolize the opposite of what often conditions in gangs did. It would offer a predictable life, having a home to come to, experiencing safety in everyday life, and planning and organizing one's future by oneself, without acceptance from the brotherhood. The craving of experiencing pride, by being a good role model for their children, was evident. The values of the street culture did not match with the interviewee's visions anymore. Being institutionalized could create strong feelings of powerlessness over not being able to intervene in what was happening in the outside world, for example, to protect the family and raise children.

### **5.2.2 Identity narratives**

However, leaving a context that has meant a lot to oneself was not an easy mission, as one's identity and self-perception have been connected with being part of a certain gang and field.

Among many interviewees, being part of a gang was who they were, and what their identity was built upon. Their behavior had formed their street habitus, it was formed by experiences of the street culture and the socialization with other gang members (see e.g., Sandberg & Pedersen 2011). From this point of view, the gang became an arena, a field, where a certain type of identity could emerge, in interaction with other members (see e.g., Sandberg 2008, 2009; Shamma & Sandberg 2016; Sandberg & Fleetwood 2017). The street field could function as a production unit for identity, and thus verify the development of “code of the street” (see Anderson 1999), but is in this sense also a separation unit for which forms and expressions of these do not work well, and which are impermissible. Jawad talks about how he felt betrayed by his friends and described a scenario where he always stood up for his friends, who then turned their back on him and never did anything for him. David says that today he chooses wisely who he hangs out with, to prevent socializing with people who try to take advantage of him. He also talks about how he misses his old friends, from the street, but that he is aware that he cannot see them anymore. During the interview with Milton and Daniel, they reflected on their own participation and contribution within the street culture, and realized that they have not been so easy having to do with. However, Daniel still has some difficulties with adapting to a lifestyle, outside the street. He explained how he is still disturbed by his old thought patterns, and has a hard time controlling his feelings.

Daniel: “I often think that I exploit people or manipulate them. It’s a complicated way of thinking I have. If I do something nice or good, then it feels like I’m doing it for some reason that will gain me in the end. It feels wrong. I know it’s impossible, but it feels so damn wrong. I struggle so much with feelings and emotions. I do not want to feel them nor accept them. Earlier I identified with this feeling, that I am manipulative. ‘This is me and then I behave like that’, and that’s why I was horrible and that’s how I was. I did not want to be evil so I could not handle it. I have to gather my thoughts and tell myself that there is nothing wrong with doing things for my own sake. As long as I don’t do anything someone else’s expense or diminish other people there’s nothing wrong with it.”.

Leaving a gang can conceivably mean a transformation of who you are, how you present yourself to your surroundings, and how you perceive yourself. This means that one is being forced to navigate in a partially unknown environment, without the security that the previous culture may have entailed. This process may be perceived as necessary, but it may nevertheless also be associated with having to deal with a lot of uncertainty. The search for a new belonging does not take place from a safe ground to another clear and ready established position. During the beginning of the exit-process, many of the interviewees told me that they were going through the feeling of a faceless state. In order to rebuild their identity, they had to start with working with themselves, partly to reduce false hopes of what the new life could offer them and to give stability to their will of succeeding.

### **5.3 Life without the gang**

The exit-process is long and complex, it involves elements on several levels, such as individual, family, and societal levels. The process covers more than not committing crimes anymore, as one needs to build a new identity, and replace the void that the gang members previously got when being part of a gang. As the defectors reflected upon their previous lives, and told their stories of their lived experiences of this time, a victim narrative emerged. The interviewees have not only been offenders of violent crimes, but they have also witnessed violence. Some of the interviewees live under constant threat and have to constantly keep some precautions in mind. These stories will be referred to as victim narratives. Even though the interviewees were and still are facing a tough time, none of them were willing to give up or stop believing in themselves. Although the interviewees from a time-to-time struggle with keeping their spirit up, they always find a way back to keep on fighting. I have chosen to call these stories survivor narratives.

#### **5.3.1 Victim narratives**

When talking about how to handle today's issues, many talked about how they have started to actually work with themselves, and that they have opened "a box" within themselves, that previously was shut, namely self-reflection. During the interviews, we talked about how previous life choices still affect the interviewees, and many said that they have to accept that this time took part of their life, hence, try to see it as that it happened for a reason, or that it was something they wanted back then. This indicates some kind of neutralization or a way of coping (Sykes & Matza 1957), but also reminds of Sandberg's (2008) observations, when he conducted a study among drug dealers, where he saw that his informants had trouble getting a job, and that racism, ethnic discrimination, and psychological problems were present. In this paper, Sandberg suggested that everybody would act in similarly under similar circumstances (ibid.: 531). Some men analyzed their temper and need for control, but also other shortcomings and situations they don't master. Today, they are trying to deal and live with these issues. Their lives have taken a different path, and they are for the first time ever, ready to criticize themselves, and strive for long-term goals, rather than quick solutions. But sadness also takes part in the process, as many of the interviewees have lost friends and relatives, to the violence on the street. In worst cases, this has resulted in varietal mental disorders.

Yousif: "When they murdered my friend in front of my eyes, I flipped. I saw my friend get shot and after that, I haven't been the same person. I'm sorry I can't keep on talking about this, it brings up so many memories. I can't handle these feelings. It's in my past. [...] Previously, I did not know what PTSD is, I'm not gonna lie

about it, huh. You know, I did not even know that you could talk to a psychologist ten years ago. In our home countries, there is no such thing. There is no medicine for depression, there are no psychologists, there are no such things, you get me?”.

Eric: “But you know what, honestly, today it feels like I have no life, my everyday life is so boring. I would give anything to get my friend back (referring to a friend that passed away due to a criminal conflict), you know we could have had a normal life together. [...] I want to feel the feeling I felt when I was with him (the friend who died), but I do not think it will happen. My life is so boring, it really is like day and night if you compare it with before. I have some friends I want to call but I know it will not be good if I contact them. [...] I used to think that being alone is best, after I was let down, I still have a hard time trusting people. I neither dare nor want to talk to new people. What should I say about my past, how should I explain why I live in this city, what should I say at a job interview or when I meet new people, I have no job experience, I don’t even know what a personal letter is, but I do know that I need to submit one.”.

The decision of exiting is not only about to stop committing crimes nor working with oneself. All the interviewees told me that there are some limitations that they can’t ignore, and precautions that they always need to keep in mind. These limitations could concern, where to live, who to hang out with, areas they could not enter, but also how to avoid situations that would challenge their temper. Amir clarifies during the interview that he doesn’t live where he lives today, because he wants to live there, but because he has to live there, to stay alive. Mehdi on the other hand is not afraid of going back to his hometown, but explains why he can’t ever live there again.

Mehdi: “I cannot be there and start having routines there again, like wake up, go to work, go to the gym and go home, people would start talking and it would turn out dangerous for me. I can’t overlook these basic things anymore, I have to take care of myself, I have to work, so the only choice for me would then have been to go back to the old and I do not want that, so that’s why I had to leave.”.

Even if they have set their mind on something else and tried to move on, two interviewees say that they occasionally are reminded by the police of who they used to be. Both of the interviewees seem to be upset and frustrated about this special treatment, and sometimes they feel that they will never be accepted in mainstream society, no matter whether they do not commit crimes anymore, and live a normal life today.

Omar: “The police have all my contact information, so I do not understand why they did not call me. They just went home to a friend of mine and scared her. It made me very angry. And you know I’m not even suspected of anything, they were looking for me because I am going to testify. What a fucking circus. I do not understand why it is so important to find me then, or why they had to go to my friend to find me. You know they could have called her instead of going to her house and scare the shit out of her. I don’t know what to say. She was shocked that they went to her house. They thought she was my girlfriend. But I do not want to have to reflect on who I hang out with, as long as I do not do anything wrong.”.

During my interview with Max, who has been placed in another city through the exit-program, we talked about how he is finding his new neighborhood, his answer was not what I expected.

Max: “The police visited me yesterday. They searched my apartment. My door is broken. So, now I have to change apartment, AGAIN. This is so fucking embarrassing. They didn’t even tell me why they were there? When my contact person from the exit-program asked the police what this was about, they said that they went into the wrong apartment. Do you hear what I’m saying? It’s a fucking joke. I don’t know what kind of game they are playing with me. It’s so embarrassing, my neighbors can confirm that I am like any other neighbor, calm and quiet, and now it’s like a fucking zoo, people come here and take pictures of my door and post it on social media that they were at my house. WHAT THE FUCK. This is not okay. It’s not fair. I am not even suspected of anything.”.

These narratives were ambiguous in many ways and had several different meanings, which is not uncommon in stories of violence (see e.g., Polletta et al. 2011). The messages of the stories were ambivalent, as they simultaneously contained an offender but also a victim perspective. The interviewees described to me how their previous choices seemed rational to them back at this time, but also how they clearly distance themselves from these actions today. It is a complex and difficult topic, which Jacobs and Copes (2015) argue that often is ignored, when studying violence and offenders. Sandberg has titled one of his papers as “Gangster, victim or both” (2009) which further supports Jacobs and Copes’ (2015) argument. As Sandberg (2009) has argued, being an offender does not have to mean that you cannot be a victim, and that you can be both at the same time. The victim narratives did not only justify some behaviors or actions, as they also touched upon sensitive topics that otherwise would have been forgotten, such as losing friends, witnessing murders, feeling harassed by mainstream society with the police at front. These stories did not make a clear-cut point, as they lack a clear conclusion and purpose. How these stories are received and interpreted is up to their listeners.

### **5.3.2 Survivor narratives**

Finally, we talked about future plans and goals that the interviewees have set for themselves. The interviewees have been going through a rough time, some of them still are, which usually started in their early youth or even childhood, and has characterized their whole lives. The survivor narratives were present through all interviews, as it is something that has shaped the interviewees and kept them strong during their growth. These stories were important when making meaning of their lives. They also give sense to some smaller occasions, that together have framed and formed their identity.

Even though identities are formidable through the lifespan (Presser 2009), the survivor narrative could be found at all life stages. The events could differ among the interviewees, as one of them went through domestic violence at home, while others were victims of bullying or racism at school. None of them were talking about giving up, even if they were going



through a hard time. They had thought about what is possible for them in their current situation, but also what could be a long-term goal. Today they appreciate having their own bed, having food on the table, and being alive. They also seemed very expectant of what the future holds. Chris tells me about his plans for this summer and autumn, as we talk about this he laughs and says that previously he couldn't even plan a day in advance.

Chris: "If all my injuries have healed as they should, I'll start studying in the autumn. I need to have shit going on, I can't just sit on my ass all day. [...] This is the first summer in many years that I won't be locked up. So, I'm just gonna enjoy this time, and in the autumn, I'll start taking care of stuff. I know that I need to see a psychologist and get both help and medication for my mental illness."

Both Hugo and Goran say that sometimes they doubt themselves, but that they are surrounded by people who believe in them, and that sometimes when they feel like giving up, they remind themselves of not letting other people down. They have more understanding today for themselves. They work with acceptance, both towards others and themselves. They also seem aware that everything won't turn out exactly as they planned, but that it's fine and that a bad day is not the same thing as a bad life. They try to break the negative spiral that they ended up in before.

Hugo: "There are so many people who tell you that you'll never get a job or an apartment, that you're fucked for life. And if you think like that, why even bother trying to change your life. But now I know that there are people who are willing to help you and give you a chance. It is important to surround yourself with people who believe in change. I think people want to give up, because lets be honest, it is the easiest way out."

Goran: "Sometimes when things take time, I think about doing a gig (referring to criminal activity) or so, but I was prepared that it wouldn't be easy to say no to the easy money. But I know myself better now, and I know that I will be angry and pissed for about 30-45 minutes, then I forget about it. Or maybe not completely forget, but the thoughts won't bother me anymore. [...] I've learned the hard way, and I actually appreciate what I have been through. I've met so many people in my life, so today I know what kind of people to avoid, what situations I need to stay away from. I have my own red flags, and I have been there. At the bottom. I have learned good things, not just bad things. And from the bad, you also learn new things."

## 6 Conclusion and final discussion

This thesis aimed to explore defectors narratives of lived experiences from the time of both being part of, and leaving a gang, the street culture, but also experiences from here and now, having a life without the gang. The study is based on interviews with eight men from all around Sweden, who are participating in an exit-program. By combining a theoretical framework consisting of Bourdieusian criminology and narrative criminology an analysis of stories told by defectors, that explore values and attractions of entering a gang, but also problematic aspects of being part of a gang, is offered. The analysis has also taken into consideration how theoretical concepts, built upon Bourdieusian criminology, have influenced the defectors experiences. In the ethical consideration, I have discussed how the dynamics between the interviewer and the interviewees might have affected the interviews. I have also justified how I have tackled the acquired knowledge in order to not under any circumstances take part in any harmful information. Finally, I have accounted for which measures I have used to protect my interviewee's anonymity and safety. When analyzing the gained data, I found seven narratives, these represent the process that might have influenced the defectors entry, exit and life without the gangs. The identified narratives are inequality, brotherhood, violent, turning points, identity, victim, and survivor narratives. In the following, I will summarize my most important findings of the study, and then I will end with a reflection for future studies. The discussion will depart from the subchapters of the results chapter.

The lived experiences of the interviewees from the time of entering gangs were rooted in a sense and feeling of exclusion. Many interviewees perceived themselves as inadequate in different environments. Four interviewees told me about their experiences from school, where some of them were bullied, or in other ways did not feel accepted for who they were. Some of them had different ethnicities than most of the kids in school, others looked different or were late bloomers. They lacked a sense of belonging and had to look for friends and like-minded people elsewhere. Two interviewees told me about their tangled upbringing, in a home where domestic violence took place. One of them, told me about being too young and too small to protect his mother from his stepdad. His mother was afraid when he wasn't home, but he couldn't stand the situation at home. In combination with being rejected from different circles of friends and having thoughts of not being good enough, the interviewees developed at an early stage of their lives anger, frustration, and disappointment. On the street, they could

express who they were, and were accepted as a member of the crew, the gang. Many developed deep friendships with the kids from the same area, and experienced a brotherhood. Feeling recognition was important for all the interviewees, as well as personal dignity. The interviewees told me about their experiences of how it all started as a game for them, being outdoors and having fun with their friends. Some of the interviewees debuted in crime already at this stage of their lives, but they did not understand the seriousness of which path their lives were about to take. The security from their friends, the other gang members, and the temptation of achieving easy money in combination with an action-filled life drove the interviewees into more and more serious crimes. The deeper they got into crime, the more status, and money they earned. They were surrounded by friends who got their back.

With money comes jealousy, with jealousy comes threats and in order not to lose face, they had to fight. Violence became important in two different matters, first of all, to maintain and enhance status, and also to create stories. Both friends and rivals needed to know that there was no point in messing with you and this was assured through stories of violence. One had to create a name for themselves. This is one aspect of how street culture was reproduced and maintained. The exposure to violence was present, both of their own experiences, of being beaten up and shot, seeing friends being executed in front of their eyes, but also exposing others to violence. During one interview, an interviewee described to me that violence is unavoidable on the street, and that people won't last in the street field if they aren't there only for the money. Violence was used in a multifaceted way. By interpreting the stories of the interviewees', a conclusion that can be drawn is that violent stories are a complex and sometimes contradictory phenomenon. Throughout my analysis, I have tried to explore the several meanings of their stories of violence, and how it has affected the interviewees as offenders, victims, and the street culture they have been taking part in. The violent stories have a multifaceted nature, which makes them challenging to interpret, I would argue both within and outside academia. Those who are keen on the glorification of street cultures will "hear" stories of recognition, respect, and money, as those who are interested in accounts will "hear" irresponsible neutralizations and justifications.

All the interviewees had experienced some kind of threat and fear of serious injuries and even witnessed death. Longer and shorter prison sentences became unavoidable, and some interviewees boosted their violence capital during the prison visits, while others started reflecting upon what they are doing with their lives, and if the street culture really is worth

one's life. Eventually, they all came to a turning point, when they felt that their previous lives were unsustainable and indefensible for relatives and eventual partners. Hence, they reached out to the exit-programs and asked for help to leave the street and their lives characterized by violence. Some of the interviewees had been placed in other cities, others have in addition had to change their personal information. After having left the gang, they could reflect upon their own violence capital, and consequences of having this capital, and whether they were really willing to pay the price of it. When not being part of the gang anymore, many realized that they had lived in disillusion. They understood that this portrayed brotherhood, that they wished for, doesn't exist. Loyalty was suddenly nothing one could take for granted. The gang membership did not fulfill their hopes, which made belonging increasingly problematic and limiting. Beyond the fact that the street culture was limiting them, and problematic for their own future plans, such as starting their own family, the gang itself began to appear as a destructive environment. Neither the street, nor gang membership that followed, did turn out as they had expected from the beginning.

Even if the interviewees had accepted that this portrayed brotherhood did not exist and that the street culture did not fulfill their hopes, they soon realized that their identity was at a large extent built upon who they were on the street. Leaving a gang was not only about not committing crimes anymore, but also reconstructing their identity. The creation of a new context, position, and role in life are together energy-consuming processes. Changing one's life is not always predictable, and sometimes one has to face different solutions, but with different methods this time. Sometimes doubt took part in the journey, and at these times it was and still is important to look back to the turning points, and remember why one started this process, but also to get the support that is needed. All except one interviewee emphasized how their own will was crucial for them to leave the gang and the street, and trying to change their lives with help of the exit-programs. Some interviewees started the exit-process hoping to still be able to live in both worlds, but realized later on that they had to let go of their old life if they truly wanted to create a new one. In order to resist different temptations, such as easy money or hanging out with old friends, they had to be sure that this is the way they want to go. The decision had to come from their heart.

Some interviewees felt that no matter what they do today, mainstream society will never accept them, and that it is impossible to be reintegrated into society. This was due to many unfamiliar events they had taken part in, as being new at work, in a new city, not knowing

what to say or how to explain why they live where they live now, but also due to recurring visits and visitations by the police, both at their homes and at friends' homes. The victim narratives might appear as neutralization techniques to some readers. My conclusion is that they serve to excuse some of their previous actions and behaviors, but these stories have more depth as well. In the same way that violent stories did not serve only one purpose, I argue that victim stories neither make a clear-cut point, nor present the interviewer in a positive or negative light. The stories tend to touch upon many sensitive threads, but the absolute truth is difficult to find. When telling victim stories in a context of defectors, I believe that much of the interpretive work is left to the listeners and readers.

Although they had some doubting moments, none of the interviewees had any experiences or thought of giving up. During more difficult times filled with more doubts, the interviewees said that they remind themselves that other people believe in them and that they will not let these down. Through all life stages, they had a fighting spirit. Working with acceptance is something many interviewees do on a daily basis, both towards themselves and others. The differences they could see themselves having gone through today, was that they had developed their thinking and planning ability. They also seem aware that everything won't turn out exactly as they planned, but that it's fine and that a bad day is not the same thing as a bad life. Today the interviewees experience that they can see their own limitations and set reasonable goals for them. They are also able to set long-term goals, in contrast to their previous lives, where they couldn't make plans for the following day. Many interviewees tell how they can appreciate the small, but necessary things in life, such as having their own bed, eating food every day, spend time with people they hold close, and the fact that they still are alive. Many of the men gave the impression of being expectant on what the future holds, and how their life will turn out even after the exit-program.

Looking at these men's lives from this linear overview of time, it becomes clear how their childhood and school failures, participation in gangs, and then turning points after several years of criminal activities, have strongly influenced how they managed to shape a new and somewhat functional life during their exit-process. When talking with the interviewees, it turned out that they had not always seen themselves as gang members. They had seen themselves as a group of friends, who grew up in the same neighborhood, and supported each other when mainstream society turned them down. This is one reason why the interviewees got so deep into the street culture and did not reflect upon how much violence they were

exposed to, before facing their turning points and starting to reflect upon their future, and other values such as safety and predictive lives. They have described the exit-process as challenging, and clarified that the biggest issue is not about not committing crimes anymore, but much bigger and wider. Many had to leave out all their previous friends from their new life, but also learn how to live an everyday life under threat. Today they need to consider how to think, how to socialize, how to move, and how to behave in present and future actions.

The interviewees varied in age and were everything from 20 to 38 years old. After having carried out all the interviews it was apparent that with increasing age and experience, the interviewees were better to reflect upon their life choices, but also how they behaved and acted during their adolescence. Younger interviewees reflected more upon how external factors had affected them, but among the older interviewees, they could look into themselves and analyze their own part in the gang. After having committed to an exit-program, the interviewee's previous values, such as a flashy life, being able to afford the most expensive clothes, the coolest cars, and so on, did not matter anymore. Maybe it was maturity, or maybe the risks weren't worth the price anymore. Instead of being fixed by money and material things, the interviewees started thinking about the consequences for both themselves but also for their relatives. Reflections upon what their own parents would think, and also how it would affect their family lives have become more important. Thoughts of what it would be like if they continued with crime, maybe ended up in prison, or possibly even dead crossed their minds. Maturation was perceived as the result of several negative consequences, that other life opportunities were limited through the way of life, that the realization became apparent that the time as a gang member is limited. New responsibilities needed to be reminded, especially those associated with parenthood.

The interviewees' experiences of themselves after having committed to an exit-program is that they have developed a responsible side of themselves. They work a lot with acceptance of breaking free from their previous lives, which were characterized by violence and unpredictable fights, that they had with themselves and other people. The exit-process is comprehensive and requires the will of its participants, but it is also dependent on a social context, hence, a holistic approach is crucial in order to succeed. In this paper, I have analyzed defectors' stories of their experiences that led them into crime and street culture, and how the exit-process begun in their lives. There are major challenges for mainstream society's work with gang members, when supporting them to reintegrate into society. In Sweden, there

are tendencies for both ambitions that work towards this goal and direction, as well as matters that complicate and make the work more difficult. I believe that in order to successfully reintegrate gang members into society, we need to be aware of and have knowledge about components that create stability in a defector's life. How these can be strengthened, is as significant, as identifying the risks one might face, and how these can be counteracted. In order to increase knowledge, mainstream society needs to cooperate with gang members and defectors. An interesting aspect for further research would be to evaluate exit-programs. The national exit-program that the Ministry of Justice has commissioned to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, the Police authority, National Board of Institutional Care and the National Board of Health and Welfare, is not fully developed yet. It will be interesting to see whether one national program will be capable of offering support for its participants, and able to modify the structure of the program based on the needs of the participants, as gang members come from varying conditions.

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