Administrative Desistance

The Case of the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme[1]

Denne artikel er tildelt
en CC-By 4.0 licens

Anders Stenström, Institutionen för polisiärt arbete, Malmö universitet
Anita Heber, Kriminologiska institutionen, Stockholms universitet

Abstract

Gang exit programmes have become a central policy response to organised crime in the Nordic countries, yet research has paid limited attention to how desistance is administratively organised and governed in practice. This article examines the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme as a form of *administrative desistance*. Drawing on three types of qualitative material, the article shows how desistance is structured through four interconnected practices: eligibility assessments, relocation, intervention and monitoring, and outcome classifications. Through these practices, desistance becomes measurable, documented and governed within hybrid arrangements of policing, welfare administration and marketised service provision. Rather than suspending crime governance, the programme reorganises it through continued classification, conditional inclusion and bureaucratic control. The article contributes to research on gang exit programmes and gang desistance by developing the concept of administrative desistance and showing how exit from criminal gangs is shaped through administrative processes that both enable and constrain individuals' exit from organised crime.

Avhopparprogram har blivit en central åtgärd i arbetet mot organiserad brottslighet i Norden men forskningen har bara i begränsad utsträckning uppmärksammat hur avhopp administreras, organiseras och styrs i praktiken. Denna artikel undersöker det svenska nationella gängavhopparprogrammet som en form av *administrativt avhopp*. Med utgångspunkt i tre typer av kvalitativt material visar artikeln hur gängavhopp organiseras genom fyra sammanlänkade praktiker: behörighetsbedömningar, omlokalisering, insatser och kontroll, samt klassificeringar av utfall. Genom dessa praktiker görs avhoppen mätbara och möjliga att dokumentera och styra inom en organisatorisk hybridstruktur som förenar polisiärt arbete, välfärdsadministration

1. This research was funded by the Swedish Research Council, Vetenskapsrådet (2023-00699). We would also like to thank the reviewers for their valuable and constructive feedback.

och marknadsorienterad tjänsteproduktion. Avhopparprogrammet innebär därmed inte ett avslut på samhällets kontroll av avhopparen, utan snarare en omorganisering av denna kontroll genom fortsatt klassificering, villkorad inkludering och administrativ uppföljning. Artikeln bidrar till forskningen om avhopparverksamheter och gängavhopp genom att utveckla begreppet administrativt avhopp och visa hur utträde ur kriminella gäng formas genom administrativa processer som både möjliggör och begränsar individers väg ut ur organiserad brottslighet.

Denne artikel er tildelt en CC-By 4.0 licens

Keywords
desistance, risk; governance; policing; Sweden; gang desistance; programmes; gang exit.

Introduction

"It is not necessary to accept everything as true; one must only accept it as necessary" – Franz Kafka, *The Trial*

Kafka's depiction of bureaucratic authority in *The Trial* illustrates an administrative logic in which outcomes depend less on intent or understanding and more on compliance with an opaque system governed by its own internal rules. Kafka's insight is sociologically profound. In modern societies, individual life courses are increasingly shaped through administrative processes rather than personal decisions. Importantly, when it comes to gang desistance, access to police protection, social support and secure accommodation depends less on the desister's agency, and more on whether situations can be rendered administratively manageable. The governance of gang desistance, then, manifests and operates through classifications, handbooks and checklists that define what becomes possible and required, and who is included and excluded (cf. Foucault, 1979; Ericson and Haggerty, 1997).

The current article approaches gang exit as a form of administrative governance. Rather than treating desistance as an individual choice or relational turning point, it examines how leaving crime is constituted as an administrative condition. Drawing on the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme, the analysis shows how desistance is produced, stabilised and, at times, withdrawn through routine bureaucratic practices. To paraphrase Kafka's depiction, we argue that it is not the individual decision to desist that is decisive, but rather whether that decision can be translated into a viable case and sustained through administrative procedures (cf. Johansson, 1992; Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2003; Lipsky, 2010; Brodkin, 2011; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2022). Exit from gangs with facilitation from governmental actors thus emerges as a process that must be institutionally initiated, maintained and recognised in order to be feasible.

Gang exit programmes have become a central component of crime control strategies across the Nordic countries. In Sweden, Denmark and Norway,

Denne artikel er tildelt
en CC-By 4.0 licens

assisted gang exit initiatives have expanded in response to escalating levels of organised crime, serious violence and public concern about social insecurity. These programmes are commonly framed as supportive measures designed to enable withdrawal from criminal networks through protection, welfare support and rehabilitation. As such, gang exit occupies a strategic position at the intersection of policing, welfare provision and contemporary crime governance.

Alongside this policy development, a growing body of Nordic criminological research has examined gang exit and assisted desistance. Existing studies have documented organisational challenges, changing participant profiles, the increasing complexity of exit work, particularly in relation to younger participants, and extensive social vulnerability (e.g. Forkby et al., 2024; Hedlund et al., 2026; Johansen et al., 2026). Other contributions have furthermore focused on practitioners' dilemmas, inter-agency coordination and the tensions between welfare-oriented and security-oriented logics (Johansen, 2024; Gålnander et al., 2025). Taken together, this literature has provided important insights into how exit work and related interventions are experienced and organised at the level of policy and professional practice.

Despite these contributions, an understanding of how gang exit is *practically organised* remains limited. Much of the existing research approaches exit programmes as interventions, policies or relational practices, often foregrounding motivation, identity change and social bonds. By contrast, less attention has been paid to how desistance is produced, stabilised and evaluated through everyday administrative work. As a result, we know relatively little about the procedural and temporal dimensions of gang exit work, including how eligibility is assessed, how risk and motivation are negotiated, how key interventions such as relocation unfold and how support is conditional. This analytical gap is notable given the central role of administrative routines, documentation and formal decision-making in contemporary crime governance (Åkerström et al., 2021; Stenström, 2023), and will here be further explored.

Importantly, we introduce the concept of *administrative desistance* to capture this mode of governance. We conceptualise administrative desistance as a process of desistance from crime that unfolds within an organised, bureaucratic framework. Administrative practices both initiate and render the desistance process visible, while also providing a means of assessing its success. Thus, desistance within assisted desistance and exit programmes is closely intertwined with administration, and our concept directs attention to the mundane practices through which leaving crime is normalised as an object of bureaucracy. In this article we show how exit work is embedded in hybrid governance arrangements such as policing, welfare administration and marketised service provision, while analytically demonstrating how the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme reorganises

Denne artikel er tildelt en CC-By 4.0 licens

rather than suspends 'governing through crime' (Simon, 2020) through crime-related classifications that continue to condition inclusion, support and mobility.

Literature review

Research on gang desistance and exit programmes has expanded substantially over the past two decades, particularly within branches of criminology and the sociology of punishment. Despite this growth, the literature remains analytically divided in ways that obscure how desistance is practically produced, recognised and governed. Influential strands of desistance research have predominantly conceptualised desistance as an individual, relational or narrative process shaped by cognitive transformation, social bonds and life-course transitions (e.g. Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2006; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). From this perspective, desistance is understood as gradual and non-linear, often marked by ambivalence, frustrations, relapse and the renegotiation of belonging (Carlsson, 2017; McNeill, 2006; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Wahlman 2025, 2026). While this body of work has been crucial in challenging simplistic notions of turning points and rational choice, most of this literature typically tends to treat institutions as supportive backdrops rather than as constitutive forces that shape what desistance is and how it unfolds.

Ethnographic and cultural criminological contributions have further unsettled linear models of desistance by exploring affect, ambiguity, complexity and the emotional pull of criminal life as well as its social relationships (Forkby et al., 2019; Johansen, 2022; Hedlund et al., 2026; Tutenges et al., 2026). For example, the very elements that draw individuals into street crime – community, violence and drugs – may also motivate attempts to leave it (Tutenges *et al.*, 2026). Furthermore, penal-welfare institutions can play a dual role for desisters, providing practical support and encouragement while simultaneously contributing to feelings of frustration and powerlessness (Todd-Kvam and Todd-Kvam, 2022). More specifically, police officers' support to gang desisters has been described as a 'double-edged approach of care and control' (Johansen, 2024: 305).

Parallel qualitative research on Nordic exit programmes has focused on organisational challenges and professional dilemmas within assisted desistance. Studies of the so-called 'new generation' of gang desisters in Sweden and Denmark show how exit structures are increasingly confronted with younger individuals, severe violence, trauma, increasing digital exposure to criminal opportunities and transnational criminal networks (Hedlund et al., 2026). Accompanying this development is a gradual shift in Nordic crime policy responses to gangs, from welfare-oriented prevention towards more punitive, security-driven and increasingly transnational approaches

Denne artikel er tildelt en CC-By 4.0 licens

to gang crime (Johansen et al., 2026). Collectively, these analyses offer important insights into how practitioners experience and conceptualise exit work, how established intervention models are challenged by changing conditions and how crime policies are formulated and implemented. At the same time, exit programmes are largely treated as welfare or support initiatives under pressure, rather than as institutional sites where criminal justice logics, risk governance, formal control and responsibilisation are actively operationalised in everyday practice.

Consequently, this body of work rarely traces how macro-level shifts materialise in everyday administrative practices – where individuals seeking to leave crime are assessed, categorised and governed through routine procedures. That is, exit programmes appear primarily as contexts that individuals move through, rather than as governance arrangements that actively classify, condition and delimit the possibility of desistance. While acknowledging the contribution of this literature, we maintain that we still know relatively little about how desistance itself is constituted as an administrative object through institutional routines, classifications and risk logics. This raises important questions regarding how desistance is governed in practice; how individual desisters are translated into administratively manageable cases. This omission is striking given broader criminological insights into the expansion and expressions of penal governance (e.g. Cohen, 1985; Feeley and Simon, 1992; Garland, 2001; Simon, 2020; Wacquant, 2020).

In short, existing research has generated important knowledge about desistance and exit work but offers more limited insights into how desistance becomes an administrative object. The present article addresses this gap by analysing how gang desistance is organised and governed within the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme.

Desistance as an administrative process

We approach gang exit programmes as administrative governance arrangements in which desistance must be transformed into an administratively viable case in order to exist institutionally. Rather than emerging solely through personal transformation, desistance is produced through classification, assessment and organisational procedures. This insight draws on research on street-level bureaucracy and human service organisations (i.e. the police and social services), which has shown that public interventions depend on the construction of cases that can be administered bureaucratically (Johansson, 1992; Lipsky, 2010; Maynard Moody and Musheno, 2022).

Approaching desistance in this way centres classification as a foundational governing practice. Eligibility, motivation and risk function not as neutral descriptors but as administrative categories through which individuals become intelligible and governable (cf. Rose, 1999). Desistance becomes institutionally

Denne artikel er tildelt
en CC-By 4.0 licens

real only once it has been stabilised as a case that fits available procedures, mandates and resources. Where this translation fails, desistance cannot proceed as an intervention, regardless of individual intent.

Hence, case construction, risk assessment and responsibilisation together establish a framework in which desistance is simultaneously enabled and constrained. Individuals are included insofar as they remain administratively intelligible, legitimate and manageable, and excluded when they no longer fit procedural expectations. In this sense, the desister is an organisational artefact that is constructed by a bureaucratic infrastructure (cf. Ericson et al., 2000). Moreover, desistance is not opposed to crime control but reorganises how it operates, extending governance into welfare, housing and service provision and dispersing control across multiple institutional sites (Cohen 1985; Shearing and Wood 2003). Consequently, desistance emerges as a contingent institutional status, produced through administrative practices, sustained through compliance and potentially being withdrawn when procedural thresholds are crossed.

The Swedish National Gang Exit Programme

In recent years, escalating levels of serious gang violence in Sweden have coincided with increased demand for gang exit support and with a changing profile among those seeking assistance. In Sweden there is one national gang exit programme for gang desisters facing a high level of threat from other gang members, which is the programme examined in this study. There are also local programmes and individual support for gang desisters facing a lower level of threat and for former offenders, as well as local programmes for young people at risk of, or already involved in, offending. These programmes are now increasingly approached by younger individuals with extensive exposure to violence and complex, overlapping vulnerabilities, including trauma, mental health problems, addiction and debt (see Hedlund et al., 2026).

National gang exit work in Sweden can be described as a hybrid governance arrangement involving the Police Authority, municipal social services and private or non-governmental providers (Stenström and Heber, 2026). The police occupy a central position in conducting threat and risk assessments and in initiating protective measures when required, including secure transport or temporary relocation. Municipal social services are responsible for case coordination and for decisions concerning housing, subsistence, treatment, education or employment and mentoring. Day-to-day support is delivered by contracted providers, particularly housing and coaching, while correctional services and youth care authorities become involved when individuals are subject to probation, custody or compulsory care.

Gang desisters enter the exit system through multiple routes, including self-referral, police contact, social services, probation or prison services and third-sector organisations. Initial interactions typically focus on trust-building, safeguarding and risk management rather than intelligence gathering.

Denne artikel er tildelt en CC-By 4.0 licens

These early encounters are central not only to engagement but to the initial classification of individuals as administratively viable exit cases. Following enrolment, the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme is structured around formal case contracts that specify behavioural expectations, division of responsibilities and required levels of contact. These arrangements prioritise immediate safety and everyday structure, particularly during the initial exit phase. Relocation constitutes the national programme's primary risk-management instrument and is often implemented rapidly. In practice, the gang exit programme involves complex inter-municipal coordination, housing procurement, confidentiality arrangements and the management of social and digital exposure. Crucially, the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme is best understood not as a single intervention but as a sequence of administrative steps through which desistance is managed. Each phase activates distinct organisational mandates, generates specific forms of documentation and reallocates responsibility across agencies. This structure provides the empirical foundation for analysing exit work as a form of *administrative desistance*, governed through classification, coordination, contractualisation and monitoring.

Data and methods

The analysis draws on qualitative data collected as part of a larger research project on gang desistance in Sweden, focusing on the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme. The primary material consists of 56 qualitative interviews, all conducted by the authors. Of these, 39 were conducted with practitioners: police officers and police staff at local, regional and national levels (19), social services staff (6), private service providers (9), and other public sector employees involved in gang exit work (5). The practitioner sample included both frontline practitioners from different sectors and those in more senior roles. The practitioners – primarily police officers but also social workers – facilitated contact with gang desisters who had been enrolled in the gang exit programme for at least three months. All desisters faced a high level of threat from other gang members, and most had participated in the programme for around one year, while several had already completed it. We interviewed 17 desisters (15 men and two women), with approximately half of the interviews conducted online at the participants' request and half conducted face-to-face. Interviews focused on how exit work is organised in practice, with the desistance interviews exploring the desisters' experiences and the practitioner interviews focusing on how cases are initiated, assessed and coordinated. Particular attention was paid to moments where desistance is formally defined, authorised or challenged.

The interview material is complemented by documentary material, including programme guidelines, administrative templates, contracts and procedural

Denne artikel er tildelt en CC-By 4.0 licens

manuals governing exit work. The analysis also draws on ethnographically inspired joint observations from ten conference-like, inter-agency meetings within the national gang desistance infrastructure. The meetings typically lasted half a day, although some were longer, and were organised around a conference-style format combining plenary sessions with smaller workshops. These meetings offered insight into how practitioners discussed challenges, exchanged experiences and negotiated shared understandings of desistance work across organisational boundaries. Together, these sources provide insight into both formal structures and everyday organisational routines.

The analysis follows a process-oriented qualitative approach. Analytically, the material was coded with attention to classification practices, sequencing, documentation, risk assessment and contractualisation. This approach analyses desistance as a mode of governance enacted through routine administrative work, rather than as an outcome located in individual motivation or identity change. Ethical approval for the research project was obtained in accordance with Swedish ethical review regulations. Given the sensitivity of the topic, particular care was taken to ensure voluntary, informed participation as well as pseudonymisation and confidentiality by altering or removing identifying details.

Results and analysis

Empirically, gang exit support in Sweden is organised around four interrelated procedural stages:

1. Security classification and eligibility assessment
2. Administrative relocation and inter-municipal coordination
3. Contracted intervention delivery and monitoring
4. Administrative outcome classification

Step 1: Security classification and eligibility assessment

The first step in the exit process consists of a security classification and an eligibility assessment, which functions as the primary gatekeeping mechanism of administrative desistance. It is at this initial stage that desistance is rendered a conditional and governable category. That is, entry into the national gang exit programme does not follow from vulnerability or expressed need alone, but is rather contingent upon a police-led assessment of risk, motivation and administrative suitability.

Individuals enter the exit system through multiple routes, but regardless of entry point, all cases are routed into a standardised assessment procedure co-ordinated by the Police Authority. According to programme guidelines, this procedure is designed to establish both the level of threat to which the individual is exposed and the extent to which they are considered capable

Denne artikel er tildelt
en CC-By 4.0 licens

of completing the exit process. The guidelines structuring this assessment rely on a set of flexible and context-dependent definitions relating to the desister – most notably that they have to have been involved in organised crime, demonstrate motivation to leave organised crime and consent to information sharing (Stenström & Heber, 2026). While this flexibility allows for local interpretation, these categories play a decisive role in the administrative production of desisters, as access to protection, housing and welfare support is regulated through them.

Analytically, this stage is characterised by an evaluative gaze oriented towards predefined notions of risk and administrative manageability. This is a fact of organisational life where it is impossible for bureaucracies to consider the uniqueness of each individual it comes in contact with. Johansson (1992:55) writes: 'The individual must be simplified in order to be effectively managed and controlled' (*our translation*). In other words, using policies, guidelines and organisationally produced criteria, police officers and social case workers transform individuals into a category of 'desisters'. Individuals who do not meet these criteria are not allowed access to the national gang exit programme – not necessarily because they lack motivation or face lower risks, but because their cases do not align with the programme's operational logic. At a conference, a police officer stressed that a desister needs 'motivation or willingness to adhere to certain guidelines' (County Administrative Board Meeting in May 2026). Inclusion is therefore determined by institutional fit, rather than by vulnerability or need:

> Some individuals seek immediate escape due to feelings of fear and threat, yet they do not fully grasp that an exit intervention involves undertaking lasting, transformative changes to their lives. In such situations, it is necessary to carefully determine whether genuine change is feasible, whether the intervention is appropriate, and, if so, how best to move forward. (Police officer)

However, these administrative definitions regarding whether the desister meets the criteria of being motivated, sincere and ready for the challenge of desistance are conducive to uncertainty. Specifically, the interview data suggests that practitioners' recurring fear is the possibility of allocating scarce protective measures to someone who is exploiting the programme, to someone who is not a 'genuine' gang desister. It seems like the perceived risk of 'being fooled' strengthens the programme's gatekeeping role and informs how initial encounters are handled. In the practitioner discourse, this anxiety is sometimes referred to by referencing an individual who sees the programme as an opportunity to 'have a rest' from the criminal life.

The primary classification which decides whether the gang desister can access the national programme or not situates the participants within a crime-control paradigm. That is, rather than being approached primarily as individuals seeking help and protection, they are reframed as subjects whose access to support is conditional upon administrative assessments,

Denne artikel er tildelt en CC-By 4.0 licens

compliance and projected success. As criminologists have shown in other contexts (Cohen, 1985; Simon, 2020), the reclassification from active offender to potential desister under police oversight illustrates the continuation of a crime-focused mode of governance also in governmental programmes designed to help people break free from criminal careers. Ironically, then, while the programme aims to facilitate departure from crime, police officers and social case workers continue to mediate individuals' lives using crime-based administrative categories.

Consequently, desisters who are considered not to meet the required administrative conditions are denied access to specialised support, and are viewed as individually responsible for failing to satisfy administrative criteria, thereby hindering desistance. This reflects broader tendencies in contemporary crime governance, where intervention is guided less by need than by calculated risk and institutional viability (Feeley and Simon, 1992; Hannah-Moffat, 2005; O'Malley, 2008; Simon, 2020).

Step 2: Relocation and Intermunicipal Coordination

Once an individual has been classified as eligible for exit support, relocation is initiated as the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme's primary instrument of risk management. In administrative terms, relocation constitutes the first large-scale intervention through which desistance is operationalised: it transforms an assessed risk into a spatial solution. High threat levels are not only a motivating factor for individuals to accept relocation, but also the key organisational trigger that justifies rapid inter-municipal action. One desistance coordinator noted that relocation is framed as enabling a form of everyday security, e.g. sleeping without fear and moving freely in public space without protective measures. Desistance thereby becomes anchored in immediate risk reduction rather than long-term social integration. This has important consequences for the individual, as all interviewed desisters described experiences of loneliness and difficulties associated with relocation:

> I'll be honest. This is how I personally feel it was. I feel that it was more like storage than an opportunity to reintegrate into society. Yeah, that's how I feel. I just feel that I was placed in a city, in an apartment, and then they contacted me maybe every three months. (Desister)

After the relocation, the responsibility of the desister is administratively handed over to a private contractor, and the initial and often frequent contact with the police and social services is replaced by a less regular contact with a private 'coach'. The administrative handling of relocation further reveals how desistance is translated into logistical coordination. Due to the high threat level, desisters who gain access to the national programme are often moved within just a few days to new municipalities and placed in sheltered housing. This involves complex coordination between regional police, municipal social

Denne artikel er tildelt en CC-By 4.0 licens

services and private providers, structured by confidentiality rules, procurement contracts and informal professional networks.

Recent Nordic research has emphasised the growing complexity of exit work and the tensions between welfare-oriented and security-oriented logics in its implementation (e.g. Johansen, 2024; Gålnander et al., 2025; Hedlund et al., 2026). Building on this literature, our findings show how such tensions are concretely realised through relocation as an administrative practice. Relocation therefore functions not only as a protective intervention but also to bring together the various practitioners around a common task, and more importantly, as a mechanism of spatial control, through which risk is redistributed across municipal boundaries.

Empirically, however, relocation also generates new administrative challenges. As noted above, interview data indicate a persistent concern among practitioners that desisters may instrumentalise the system, whereas desisters emphasised the loneliness associated with relocation, which in some cases seemed to contribute to relapse into criminal activity or substance use. For example, one desister talked about how loneliness made her 'miss the old thrills', while another stated:

> So, I worked. It took my mind off things. But then, when I was on my own, it was a bit of a problem. I shouldn't have done it either. I did laughing gas. I thought, 'okay, it's legal anyway.' (Desister)

For several reasons, relocation is viewed as a 'risky' step in itself by both practitioners and desisters, albeit for different reasons. Simultaneously with relocation, the national programme also demands an administratively enforced separation from previous social worlds, entailing extensive restrictions on contact with family and friends and, in many cases, a prohibition on social media use. These measures are justified as necessary for physical security, yet, as previous research has also shown (see Johansen, 2022), they also intensify isolation and place significant demands on the desister's capacity to adapt quickly to a highly regulated and socially constrained everyday life. From the programme's standpoint, managing risk increasingly mean – and also controlling – absence.

Furthermore, social workers highlight additional administrative vulnerabilities related to the procurement of private providers. Difficulties in identifying reliable contractors – and concerns about laxity or even fraud or criminal infiltration among providers themselves – is said to further complicate relocation as an administrative task. Additionally, those municipalities who receive desisters vary considerably in experience and capacity, and also there is no national mechanism to prevent placement collisions between rival gang members. In administrating the relocation, practitioners therefore rely much on informal knowledge, memory and personal contacts. The relocation process and its coordination thus depends on ad-hoc solutions operating alongside formal

Denne artikel er tildelt
en CC-By 4.0 licens

mandates, illustrating the hybrid character and fragmented nature of governance of administrative desistance in the Swedish gang exit programme.

Step 3: Contracted intervention delivery and monitoring

Following relocation, the desistance process is organised through formal agreements and structured case management arrangements. At this step in the process, administrative desistance takes a distinctly juridified and managerial form. As mentioned previously, participation in the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme is codified through a formal contract that specifies behavioural expectations, obligations and conditions for continued support. Specifically, these typically include abstention from crime and substance use, participation in scheduled activities such as employment, education or treatment, compliance with testing regimes where applicable and acceptance of ongoing monitoring. Hence, the contract transforms the complex and uneven process of desistance from crime (see Maruna, 2001) into an administrative framework that presumes linear progression and compliance through measurable behaviours. Moreover, and drawing on broader criminological and governmental analyses of responsibilisation (Rose, 1999; Garland, 2001), this arrangement exemplifies a shift from governing through direct intervention to governing through conditional self-regulation.

In practice, the responsibility for weekly supervision is typically delegated to support workers employed by private providers contracted by municipal social services. These workers are tasked with maintaining regular contact, documenting compliance, coordinating services and reporting deviations, and in this activity they follow an individual 'treatment plan' set up for the desister by the social services in their original municipality. Social services are subsequently responsible for ensuring that the private provider adheres to the treatment plan, while both the provider and the police monitor the desister's progress and potential deviations from the desistance trajectory.

Monitoring thus operates simultaneously as both support and surveillance, blurring the boundary between care and control and embedding desistance within a dense infrastructure of documentation and follow-up. Importantly, then, the Swedish system expects desisters not merely to refrain from offending, but to actively demonstrate progress in administratively recognisable ways by aligning their conduct with predefined norms of normality, stability and compliance. Put differently, desisters are governed by shaping the conditions under which they are expected to make responsible choices, rather than through overt coercion (see O'Malley, 2013). It may be seen as an organisational necessity to monitor those on exit programmes, yet, at the same time, desisters themselves have emphasised the crucial importance of trust – that others trust them and believe that they will succeed in desisting (Ugelvik, 2025). Monitoring and care therefore involve a difficult balance (see also Johansen, 2024), shaped by the programme's administrative constraints. In combination with uneven provider quality and cost-oriented procurement

Denne artikel er tildelt en CC-By 4.0 licens

practices, this might produce inconsistent forms of support and care. Social workers interviewed for this study reported that budgetary constraints shape the selection of service providers, often leading to lower-cost alternatives being prioritised despite likely differences in quality. This dynamic was also recognised by private providers, as illustrated by one provider's comment regarding higher-cost competitors: 'Of course they can offer something completely different [from us]'. An interviewed police officer further reflected on the consequences of when 'social services choose the cheapest option':

> So, it's also a question of money. Sometimes you think that this guy could get fantastic help; there's a psychologist attached to the company, there's an addiction treatment attached to it, but no, it's too expensive. It costs 2,000 [180 Euro] or more per day. We'll take this one that costs 1,200 [110 Euro] per day, and you'll get a case manager to support you and do this, who may not deliver. No, the quality is very different. Very different. Very different quality.

This economic infrastructure therefore actively shapes how exit work is organised and how decisions are made throughout the process. Financial constraints may also affect how long desisters are retained in the national programme, with great variations among municipalities, as social workers are required to balance the provision of an 'adequate' level of care against cost considerations, characteristic of New Public Management-inspired welfare administration (Clarke and Newman, 1997).

Moreover, our data suggest that desisters' progress is assessed through attendance records, written reports and behavioural indicators rather than narratives of change. Progress is thus defined through the absence of recorded problems and continued compliance with contractual conditions. In this sense, desistance management functions less as a therapeutic relationship than as a mechanism for maintaining order and ensuring that individuals remain governable within the programme. In short, then, this step embeds desistance within a dispersed regime of governance (Rose, 1999; Cohen, 1985), where inclusion is contingent on ongoing compliance and institutional fit, while quality and length are dependent on the economic infrastructure.

Step 4: Administrative outcome classification

The outcome of individual desistance cases is administratively classified by the police as either discontinued or completed. Successful desistance cases are defined in much the same way as the indicators of progress, which were described in the previous section, that is, through the prolonged absence of unwanted behaviours. However, 'successful desisters' are also expected to demonstrate a more stable life situation, characterised by secure employment, completion of compulsory schooling and living in independent housing. Still, 'completed desistance' remains an ambiguous concept, and practitioners lack a shared definition of what constitutes a successful case. Sometimes practitioners consider it a success when a desister only uses soft drugs and avoids long-term participation in violent crimes. Other interviewees adhere

Denne artikel er tildelt
en CC-By 4.0 licens

to a stricter crime control paradigm and felt that this softer approach failed to consider that such individuals continue to be 'involved in driving this criminal cycle' (police officer) by, for example, purchasing illegal drugs and thereby contributing to the gang economy.

When desisters drop out of the national programme or are discharged, they are administratively classified as 'discontinued'. An internal police document identifies the main reasons for discontinued interventions as lack of motivation on the part of the desister, followed by breaches of programme conditions, or reoffending. One interviewed police officer summarised the reasons why cases are terminated:

> It could be a relapse into drug abuse. That's very common. It's understandable. They've lived that life for so long and have the craving. Okay, but then we need to start again. That might mean treatment for the addiction once more. And then you're well and truly known in that area, because you've been out buying drugs and hanging around in those circles, so you'll have to move from there. Yeah, I suppose it was more than that as well, crime, I suppose, too. It could be that the person has been stopped and searched in a vehicle with criminals, at night. Yeah, then that's certainly reason enough to discontinue.

Thus, the discontinuation status constitutes a decisive moment in the administrative gang exit process, and the classification is triggered through more or less predefined indicators and documented deviations. In this process, complex trajectories of ambivalence, struggles or partial compliance have to be converted into a binary administrative outcome.

While cases may be discontinued for several reasons, our interview data indicates that relapse into drug use is a common cause. However, one local desistance coordinator noted that 'It depends on what you've taken, and how honest you are about it' (police officer). Our interviews further suggest that minor relapses into, for example, soft drug use do not necessarily result in programme discontinuation, although practices vary considerably between municipalities. Deviations thus represent a difficult balancing act for practitioners, as they constitute breaches of the programme agreement while discontinuation may entail substantial consequences for the desister. A discontinuation classification means that all support measures are terminated, and the desister is formally transferred out of the national programme. In practice, this often entails a re-entry into ordinary criminal justice governance, reinforcing the binary inclusion-exclusion logic underlying the programme. The discontinuation classification therefore illustrates how administrative desistance extends rather than replaces crime control. Individuals are not simply released from governance when support is withdrawn; they are reclassified and repositioned within a different segment of the penal-welfare continuum. Exit from the national programme therefore does not equal exit from governance, but a shift in how control and responsibility are organised.

From an administrative standpoint, discontinuation functions as an organisational resolution to uncertainty as it closes cases that no longer conform to

Denne artikel er tildelt en CC-By 4.0 licens

the programme's operational criteria. From the perspective of the individual, however, discontinuation may represent a premature withdrawal of support rather than a lack of intention to desist. Hence, discontinuation is not primarily justified through normative judgements about rehabilitation or moral failure, but through reference to procedural non-alignment: missed appointments, rule violations or insufficient documented progress. In this sense, the discontinuation represents a form of administrative failure rather than personal failure, marking the limits of institutional tolerance for uncertainty and deviation. This logic resonates with broader criminological analyses of net-widening (Cohen, 1985), as the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme widens the spectrum of governance by introducing additional layers of classification and reclassification, while leaving core crime-control structures intact. Support becomes conditional not only on abstaining from crime, but on remaining administratively manageable within the exit system. In summary, administrative outcome classification functions as a key mechanism through which the boundaries of desistance are drawn, defining desistance primarily through compliance/non-compliance with administrative procedures rather than through a sustained social or personal transformation.

Concluding discussion

By introducing the concept of *administrative desistance*, this article shifts analytical attention from individual change to the bureaucratic production of desistance. We have argued that the process of gang desistance within assisted desistance and exit programmes unfolds within an organised, administrative framework. Rather than functioning primarily as therapeutic or relational interventions, gang exit programmes operate through four sequential administrative practices in which desistance is constituted as a bureaucratic status through eligibility assessments, relocation procedures, intervention and monitoring, and administrative outcome classifications. Responsibility for desisters in the Swedish National Gang Exit Programme is redistributed across police authorities, social services, municipalities and private providers, illustrating how administrative desistance is embedded within hybrid arrangements of policing, welfare administration and marketised service provision. By highlighting the administrative aspect of desistance, the article complements existing Nordic research on gang exit by showing how the increasing complexity of exit work is embedded not only in changing target groups and heightened violence, but also in the bureaucratic architecture through which organised crime is governed.

While a bureaucratic framework may be inevitable in assisted desistance, we urge academics and practitioners to consider how administrative decisions affect gang desisters in exit programmes, ensuring that administrative practices support rather than undermine desistance. This also calls for resisting

Denne artikel er tildelt en CC-By 4.0 licens

binary bureaucratic classifications of desisters as either having desisted or relapsed, and instead allowing for the complexity, setbacks and fluctuations that characterise desistance as an ongoing, non-linear process. While we have analysed one particular gang exit programme in Sweden, we suggest that its bureaucratic framing and administrative decision-making may be characteristic of gang exit programmes more broadly.

As suggested in the opening discussion of Kafka's *The Trial*, the decisive issue ultimately becomes not only whether individuals wish to leave organised crime, but whether that intention can be translated into an administratively viable and sustainable case. Although gang exit programmes are organised around support and protection rather than punishment, this article shows how desisters nevertheless become subject to procedural systems that govern the conditions of inclusion, support and exclusion. Administrative routines do not merely organise gang exit interventions; they actively shape desistance in practice.

Kontaktoplysninger
Anders Stenström: anders.stenstrom@mau.se
Anita Heber: anita.heber@criminology.su.se

References

Brodkin, E.Z. (2011) 'Policy work: Street-level organizations under new managerialism', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 21(suppl. 2): i253-i277.
Carlsson, C. (2017) 'The transition to adulthood and the ambivalence of desistance', in Blokland, A. and van der Geest, V. (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of Life-Course Criminology*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 324-341.
Clarke, J. and Newman, J. (1997) *The Managerial State: Power, Politics and Ideology in the Remaking of Social Welfare*. London: SAGE.
Cohen, S. (1985) *Visions of Social Control: Crime, Punishment and Classification*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Ericson, R.V. and Haggerty, K.D. (1997) *Policing the Risk Society*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Ericson, R.V., Barry, D. and Doyle, A. (2000) 'The moral hazards of neo-liberalism: Lessons from the private insurance industry', *Economy and Society*, 29(4): 532-558.
Feeley, M. and Simon, J. (1992) 'The new penology: Notes on the emerging strategy of corrections and its implications', *Criminology*, 30(4): 449-474.
Forkby, T., Alstam, K. and Örnlind, H. (2024) 'Tension management and support when leaving a gang', *Journal of Social Work*, 24(2): 155-173.
Forkby, T., Kuosmanen, J. and Örnlind, H. (2019) *Vägen ut ur gänget: Om manligheter, broderskap och svikna förhoppningar*. Norrköping: Kriminalvården.
Foucault, M. (1979) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
Garland, D. (2001) *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Giordano, P.C., Cernkovich, S.A. and Rudolph, J.L. (2002) 'Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, pp. 990-1064.
Hannah-Moffat, K. (2005) 'Criminogenic needs and the transformative risk subject:

Denne artikel er tildelt
en CC-By 4.0 licens

Hybridizations of risk/need in penality', *Punishment & Society*, 7(1): 29-51.
Gålnander, R., Pettersson, T. and Carlsson, C. (2025) 'Limiting beliefs and desistance from gang crime', *British Journal of Criminology*, azaf103. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azaf103
Hedlund, A., Johansen, M.-L.E. and Tutenges, S. (2026) 'The new generation of gang desisters: Key challenges facing gang exit support structures in Sweden and Denmark', *European Journal of Criminology*, 14773708251408233.
Johansen, M.-L.E., Hedlund, A. and Tutenges, S. (2026) 'Nordic policy responses to gang-related crime 2009-2025: Policy developments and future challenges in Denmark, Sweden and Norway', *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*.
Johansen, M.-L.E. (2024) 'Relational police work: How police officers work with, on and through "personal relationships" in a Danish gang exit programme', *British Journal of Criminology*, 64(2): 292-307.
Johansen, M.-L.E. (2022) 'Intimate belonging-intimate becoming: How police officers and migrant gang defectors seek to (re)shape ties of belonging in Denmark', *Genealogy*, 6(2): 1-15. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy6020040
Johansson, R. (1992) *Vid byråkratins gränser: Om handlingsfrihetens organisatoriska begränsningar i klientrelaterat arbete*. Lund: Arkiv förlag.
Järvinen, M. and Mik-Meyer, N. (2003) *At skabe en klient: Institutionelle identiteter i socialt arbejde*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
Laub, J.H. and Sampson, R.J. (2006) *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Lipsky, M. (2010) *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
Maruna, S. (2001) *Making Good*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
Maynard-Moody, S.W. and Musheno, M.C. (2022) *Cops, Teachers, Counselors: Stories from the Front Lines of Public Service*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
McNeill, F. (2006) 'A desistance paradigm for offender management', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 6: 39-62.
Nugent, B. and Schinkel, M. (2016) 'The pains of desistance', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 16: 568-584.
O'Malley, P. (1996) 'Risk and responsibility', in Barry, A., Osborne, T. and Rose, N. (eds) *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism and Rationalities of Government*. London: Routledge, pp. 189-207.
Paternoster, R. and Bushway, S. (2009) 'Desistance and the "feared self": Toward an identity theory of criminal desistance', *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 1103-1156.
Rose, N. (1999) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Shearing, C. and Wood, J. (2003) 'Nodal governance, democracy, and the new "denizens"', *Journal of Law and Society*, 30(3): 400-419.
Simon, J. (2020) *Governing through Crime: Crime, Inequality and the State*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Stenström, A. (2023) 'Partnership policing and the dynamics of administrative Growth', *Policing & Society*, 33(9-10): 1051-1065.
Stenström, A. and Heber, A. (2026) 'Negotiating hybrid governance in policing: The case of Sweden's national gang exit programme', *Policing & Society*, 36(7): 928-943.
Todd-Kvam, J. and Todd-Kvam, M. (2022) 'Talking good: Analysing narratives of desistance in Norway', *British Journal of Criminology*, 62(4): 914-930.
Tutenges, S., Johansen, M.-L.E., Hedlund, A. and Sandberg, S. (2026) 'The street crime paradox: An ethnographic study of the attractions and repulsions of street culture', *British Journal of Criminology*, azag023.
Ugelvik, T. (2025) 'The kindness of strangers: Trust, recognition, and the co-production of desistance', *Theoretical Criminology*, 29(4): 416-433.

Wacquant, L. (2020) *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity. Durham,* NC: Duke University Press.
Wahlman, L.D. (2025) 'Off the hook? The "loosening" and "slipping" in the context of frustrated desistance', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X251395761
Wahlman, L.D. (2026) 'The ambivalence of desistance: Balancing in the liminal space between deviance and conventionality', *European Journal of Criminology*, 23(2): 205-224.
Åkerström, M., Jacobsson, K., Andersson Cederholm, E. and Wästerfors, D. (2021) *Hidden Attractions of Administration: The Peculiar Appeal of Meetings and Documents*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Denne artikel er tildelt en CC-By 4.0 licens