WHEN OPPORTUNITY OUTDOES RISK

– Sexual risk-taking among adolescents at youth detention centers

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BACKGROUND
Youth subjected to enforced placement due to criminality, alcohol or drug abuse or antisocial behavior is a vulnerable group; their overall health as well as their sexual health is inferior to the one of their non-detained peers. In a previous survey 2010 we found elevated sexual risk-taking among Swedish adolescent at detention centers. What is the underlying significance of these risky sexual actions, such as first intercourse at the age of 11–12, sex under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and/or having unprotected sex with an unknown partner?

METHODS
In-depth interviews were conducted in 2011 with 9 girls and 11 boys aged 15–20 who at the time of the interview were subject to mandatory care in enforced placement. Using constructivist Grounded Theory, these interviews were analyzed jointly with the results from a previous 2010 survey that included 148 detainees aged 15–20.

RESULTS
The sexual risk-taking can be understood along three separate but intersecting dimensions: individual differences, the marginalized group and the ambivalent society. Individual differences such as gender, age, ethnicity, substance abuse and cognitive ability affect the risk-taking. Low school attendance leads up to a lack of basic sexual knowledge, and alcohol and drug use, and a chaotic lifestyle all contribute to hazardous risk assessments. On a group level the interned youth are seeking intimacy, confirmation and a sexual identity as other youth. However, among these teens from difficult backgrounds this process begins at an earlier age and with other troubled youth. On a societal level their search is an ambivalent one, as they navigate between traditional and modern sexual norms. In their ongoing marginalized life, the desire to experience something good (intimacy, confirmation, pleasure), outweighs the risk for something bad (STI, unwanted pregnancy, unwanted sex). A pragmatic view of sex and sexual risk-taking where opportunity outdoes risk occurs.

CONCLUSION
Respect for this pragmatic sexual risk-taking and its many different layers of origin as well as for its positive meaning for the adolescents is needed. Furthermore, understanding these intersecting dimensions is essential if preventive work within this group is to be regarded as relevant by the adolescents themselves.