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The Swedish Crime Paradox

A Brief on Challenges
Posed by Organised Crime
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In this policy brief, based on published and forthcoming studies, author Amir Rostami outlines the changing nature of crime in Sweden, with a focus on organised crime, specifically lethal violence and fraud. What are the lessons learned from the Swedish crime paradox, namely the rise in organised crime, but not an equivalent rise in general crime, and what needs to be implemented to counter organised crime? The reaction to the question can be divided into two components: local and global.



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FORES

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Introduction

For a long time, the image of Sweden has been positive, depicting a country without serious internal conflicts (Swedish Institute 2019). An extensive welfare country with a well-functioning legal system, stable political institutions, vibrant associational life and high electoral turnout (Rothstein 2018; Rothstein, Charron, and Lapuente 2013). Andersson and Hilson (2009) suggest that for much of the 20th century “the idea of Sweden has functioned as a utopia in the political discourse of Europe and beyond”(Andersson and Hilson 2009:220). Sweden is considered one of the safest countries in the world and continues to top various international rankings, such as being among the ten happiest countries in the 2020 World Happiness Report, and among the three Best Countries for Quality of Life in the U.S. News & World Report 2021 Best Countries rankings (Helliwell et al. 2020; U.S. News & World Report 2021).

Åberg (2019) suggests that “Sweden is among the world elite of high performing countries” and according “to a number of indicators Sweden seems to enjoy the fruits of overwhelming success” such as being ranked number seven in the Human Development Index in 2018, number six in the Good Country Index in 2017, and 172 among 179 countries in the Fragile State 2021 Index (Åberg 2019:23; The Fund for Peace 2021).

However, the positive image of Sweden is being challenged, mainly due to a surge in gun and explosives violence, placing Sweden among the EU countries with the highest level of gun homicides (Brå 2021b; Rostami 2017; Sturup et al. 2019; Sturup, Gerell, and Rostami 2018). Similarly, there are challenges posed by violent extremism, statistics positioning Sweden among the European countries with the highest per capita number of foreign fighters joining terror organisations such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh (Gustafsson and Ranstorp 2017; Rostami et al. 2020). And certain linkages between organised crime and violent extremism is found (Rostami et al. 2018; Rostami 2020). Furthermore, the core of the Swedish model, namely its welfare system, is also under pressure. The Swedish National Intelligence Center’s (NUC) argues in its 2021 situational report on organised crime that criminals are starting companies to defraud the Swedish welfare system (NUC 2021). An example of the overly simplified and changing image of Sweden is how the German Bild, Europe’s largest newspaper, recently Sweden as “the most dangerous country in Europe”, a “former Nordic model country” that “has turned into a real nightmare” (Raagaard 2021).

Although we do not see an equivalent rise in general crime as we do with more organised crime, it should not come as a surprise that crime development in Sweden has captured public attention, both at the national and international

level. Nationally, law and order have emerged as one of the main concerns for Swedish voters (Andersson et al. 2021; Novus 2021). Crime policy has become, if not the most, then one among the most important policy areas, with a turn to punitive solutions resulting in an expansion of internal controls and levels of surveillance of all citizens for both criminal and non-criminal behaviours. Consequently, for years an increasing number of social issues have become linked and subordinated to crime and security policy (Andersson and Nilsson 2017; Flyghed 2005; Tham 2018). As these criminal activities escalate we will need to better forecast the many disparate emerging threats facing Sweden and Europe. Protecting our states begins with understanding the lasting, emerging and complex threats. Thus, forecasts needs to be organisationally integrated in the development of pioneering organised crime and targeted violence strategies.

Internationally, the current wave of violent gang crime manifestations in Sweden is being used as an opportunity for those engaged in disinformation and fearmongering. Political leaders, pundits, and media outlets throughout north America and in other Nordic countries have cited Sweden as a lair for violent and organised crime. Nordic politicians have even uttered the term “Swedish condition” (Svenske tilstande) whenever they want to highlight Sweden as a deterrent example, many times as a derogatory description of Sweden as a land of political correctness with a migration and integration policy and its “uncontrolled” consequences with reference to, among other things, crime (Lokland and Nilsson 2018; da Silva 2018; Svd 2019). As an example, the leader of the Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet), Sylvi Listhaug, has cautioned Norwegian citizens not to allow Norway to become another Sweden where the “Swedish condition” could very well develop (Milne 2017).

“One could suggest that the idea of Sweden once referred to as a utopia is deliberately changing to a dystopia...”

Upon examining social media and news focused on Sweden, one can certainly be persuaded that violent crime is overwhelming throughout the whole of Sweden, with a futile police response having invested little to no groundwork in managing complex gang investigations, homicides, gun and explosive violence. Accordingly, we should not be surprised when media, security pundits and news outlets refer to the current conditions in Sweden as being in a state of disorder now known as the “Swedish Condition”. One could suggest that the idea of Sweden once referred

to as a utopia is deliberately changing to a dystopia and fast joining the tumult and political discourse experienced by similar nations once regarded as calm and resolute. Nonetheless, looking behind this screen of ambiguity and closely at the reality on the ground, as opposed to misinformation and hyperbole, could there be indeed a different opinion and a more compassionate outlook on what the “Swedish condition” truly is?

In this policy brief, based on published and forthcoming studies, I outline the changing nature of crime in Sweden, with a focus on organised crime, specifically lethal violence and fraud, and discuss potential policy implications. But why care about what is happening in Sweden? Because if it can happen in a strong well-functioned welfare country, it can more or less happen anywhere. Why the focus on violence and fraud? Because violence, particularly lethal and targeted violence e.g. murder, is a robust crime type with a low dark figure of crime (e.g. unrecorded, under-coverage of crime) that is relatively easy to study and can be used as an indicator of the overall violence levels impacting civil society. Although perfect comparability between various national jurisdictions cannot be achieved, there is broad agreement on a basic definition of murder, which makes it relatively easy to use in country comparisons (Eurostat 2017). Furthermore, gun violence in Sweden, where cases mainly stem from intra gang conflict and territorial disputes, can be used as an indicator of organised crime. By studying gun violence (which has been on the rise in Sweden), we have an occasion to explore the level of violence, offenders, which organised crime groups are involved, and qualitatively compare the levels over time. Why fraud and benefit crime? Because it generates large sums of money and provides fuel for organised crime, and is a type of crime that has increased sharply in recent years in Sweden and its development risks eroding the confidence and legitimacy of the Swedish model in the long term.

The Development of Swedish Crime

Violent crime

Is Sweden seeing a surge in violence? The answer to this question is, "it depends", or "yes and no". Recently, crime in Sweden has taken an extraordinary twist and turn. During the past 50 years, lethal violence has increased up to the end of the 1980s, after which there was a significant decline, both in absolute numbers and an even sharper decline when computing the rate per 100,000 inhabitants. The lowest level of lethal violence in the past five decades was experienced in 2012. Today, however, the number of cases of lethal violence is about the same as in the high levels of the late 1980s. Calculated per 100,000 inhabitants, the number of cases of lethal violence was 1.3 in 1989 and 1.2 in 2020 (von Hofer, Lappi-Seppälä, and Westfelt 2012; Sarnecki 2022).

While the level of lethal violence has fluctuated over time and has decreased per capita, yet in absolute numbers it is at nearly the same levels as in the late 1980s: Sweden is experiencing an unprecedented surge in gun-related violence and the use of explosives by organised criminal groups (Brå 2021b; Sturup et al. 2019; Sturup, Gerell, et al. 2018). Although still low by international comparisons, the number of cases of lethal violence with the use of a guns has increased, from 17 cases in 2011 to 48 cases in 2020, according to the Swedish agency responsible for official crime statistics, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, Brå (Brå 2021b, 2021c). Recently, Brå published a study of the levels and trends in gun homicide and other homicide in Sweden, compared to 22 other European countries. They concluded that the "downward trend has stalled, and since 2013 levels of homicide have once again been on the rise" in Sweden and the

increase “is primarily linked to an increase in gun homicides, which began to rise from the year 2005”. Furthermore, they conclude that “as regards the level of gun homicide, the rate in Sweden ranks very high in relation to other European countries, at approximately 4 deaths per million inhabitants per years. The average for Europe is approximately 1.6 deaths per million inhabitants” (Brå 2021b). Sturup et al. (2018) compared the rate of gun violence in Sweden to other Western European countries for the years 1996-2015, and found that the risks among males in Sweden aged 15-29 for both lethal and non-lethal gun victimisation and perpetration increased considerably during the 20-year observation period. They found that there was a five-fold increase in the risk for victimisation in lethal and non-lethal gun violence and concluded that, in a comparative perspective, the rate of gun homicide victimisation among males 15-29 years was higher in Sweden compared to other Western European countries (Sturup et al. 2019).

“... although we are not experiencing an equivalent in crime in general... Sweden is experiencing an unprecedented surge in gun-related violence and the use of explosives...”

Gun violence is one dimension of the troubling developments in Sweden. The second component is explosives violence. Between 2011 and 2016, 77 detonated hand-grenade attacks were carried out by criminal elements in Sweden, occasionally targeting police stations and police officials (Sturup, Gerell, et al. 2018). According to the Swedish National Bomb Data Center, a collaboration between the Swedish Police, the Swedish Security Service, the Swedish Defense forces, and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency which provides statistics about events in Sweden with a criminal context

and connections to explosive contexts, about 90 bomb blasts were reported in 2018, 140 in 2019, and 100 in 2020 (Polismyndigheten 2021d, 2021b). The number of explosions is deemed to be unparalleled in other countries that are otherwise comparable with Sweden.

To sum up, although we are not experiencing an equivalent increase in crime in general, such as assault, and we observe only a minor increase in lethal violence in general (Brå 2021d, 2021c; Folkhälsomyndigheten 2021; Sarnecki 2022), we can however observe that Sweden is experiencing an unprecedented surge in gun-related violence and the use of explosives by organised crime groups.

This increase has been accompanied by a troubling trend in diminished clearance rates. The clearance rate of gang-related homicides with guns has steadily declined from 80% at the beginning of the 1990s to about 20% after 2015. For example, the clearance rate for gang-related homicides with guns is 23% for the years 2014-2017 (Brå 2019:53). And there are regional variations. As an example, the clearance rate for homicides and attempted homicides with guns in Stockholm was about 15% for the years 2014-2017 (Sturup, Rostami, and Appelgren 2018). The figures for the clearance rate for explosive violence are even more disturbing (Haglund 2020). This means that the absolute majority of perpetrators are not prosecuted, and even fewer are convicted.

Fraud

Beside violence, studying trends in fraud can be a useful tool for analysing the development of organised crime and its societal consequences, as fraud can be used as an estimation of profit from crime.

The Swedish Police has in past years cracked organised-crime groups specialised in fraud against the Swedish welfare system (Gunnarson and Rostami 2019). The Swedish National Intelligence Center (NUC) argues in its situational report on organised crime that fraud and benefit crimes are used by criminals in organised crime to secure a basic criminal income (NUC 2015). If we look more closely at reported frauds, we can note that they have increased sharply since the mid-2000s, from about 50,000 reported crimes in 2005 to over 200,000 reported crimes in 2020 (Brå 2021a; Polismyndigheten 2020).

With reference to reported benefit crimes, so-called welfare crime, an increase can be noted in recent years, from almost 10,000 reported crimes in 2011 to over 27,000 in 2020, an increase of 183% (Brå 2021a). It is important to note that the Benefit Crime Act did not enter into force until 2007. The law aims at combating fraud against certain payments from Swedish social insurance systems, such as social benefits. The purpose of the law has been to reduce the number of incorrect payments and benefit violations and to strengthen the confidence in the welfare systems (Prop. 2006/07: 80), which may partly explain the increase as authorities have had better in multi-agency collaboration and have subsequently been better at detecting benefit crime.

The government delegation for correct payments from the welfare systems estimates incorrect payments at a level of approximately 5.5% of the total expenses, excluding the pension system. This corresponds to an amount of approximately 18 billion Swedish kronor (1.8 billion euros) (SOU 2019). Previous assessments have led to similar estimates for the extent of incorrect payments. In 2010, the Swedish National Financial Management Authority estimated that 3.3% (16.5 billion Swedish kronor/1.6 billion euros) of the payments in 2009 were incorrect (Ekonomistyrningsverket 2011). Furthermore, the delegation for correct payments from the welfare systems estimates that a large proportion of incorrect payments are due to intentional errors. Of the errors caused by the applicants (persons applying for grants), approximately two-thirds are estimated to have been suspected of being intentional (SOU 2019).

The government inquiry Qualified Welfare Crime (SOU 2017), tasked with investigating the Swedish welfare state's ability to resist organised and systematic economic crime, investigated a subset of 7,350 crime reports and concluded that 84% of them could be defined as qualified welfare crime, e.g. organised crime, with an amount equivalent to 508.9 million kronor profit from crime. The Swedish National Fraud Centre (NBC) estimates in a forthcoming situational report that organised crime groups are deeply involved in all kinds of frauds. NBC estimates that organised crime groups have gained approximately 300 million kronor, equivalent to 30 million euros, from vishing scams annually. For frauds in general, NBC estimates the profit to be at least 2 billion Swedish kronor (200 million Euro) annually.

Similarly to the case of gun-related violence, the clearance rates for frauds are troubling. The clearance rate for frauds in 2020 was about 6%, a decrease of 1 percentage point compared to 2019. For benefit crimes, the personal clearance rate for 2020 was 40%. Similar to the case of frauds, a decrease of 1 percentage point compared to 2019 and 8 percentage points compared to 2018 (Brå 2021a). Note that benefit crime refers to detected crime, in contrast to e.g., most of the violence and frauds. Meaning the benefit crime is usually not reported by a victim, but rather detected by the authorities. This kind of crime has usually a higher clearance rate, but are beset with limitations and is more difficult to use as an indicator for police effectiveness.

“Overall, fraud and benefit crime seem to be as lucrative as the illicit drug market.”

Overall, fraud and benefit crime seem to be as lucrative as the illicit drug market. According to the Swedish Police, the illicit drug market in Sweden has a turnover of between 10-15 billion Swedish kronor, of which 80% needs to be reinvested in the infrastructure, leaving an estimated profit margin between 1.8-2.8 billion Swedish kronor (Polismyndigheten 2021c). Compared to the illicit drug market, fraud activities do not require the same operational and logistics cost in the form of production, intermediaries, transport routes and stockholding. For each part of the

process there is also a probability one's activities may indeed be revealed by law enforcement authorities. Intriguingly, regardless of extensive profits from drug manufacturing and distribution, it remains an onerous market in the traditional sense. Engaging in fraudulent activities, on the other hand, is much like new digital markets. Technology-oriented, network-based companies with relatively low operational and logistics cost, which generate large profits and are difficult to detect. Thus, the question is not what the profit margin of the 18 billion Swedish kronor from benefit crime is, but rather how much of that amount goes directly to organised crime. And it is not far-fetched to assume that some of the observed criminal conflicts could be linked to profits from this type of crimes, and not only linked to the illicit drug market and to interpersonal rivalries and disputes. In fact, looking closer at the development of reported offences for fraud and benefit crime as well as to confirmed cases of lethal violence with firearms, our preliminary analyses show a strong correlation between this type offences with bivariate correlation coefficient values between 0.74 to 0.91. This suggests that the dynamics within organized groups are important to study in order to develop a relevant explanatory model as to why Sweden stands out in certain respects conserving crime (Mondani and Rostami 2022).

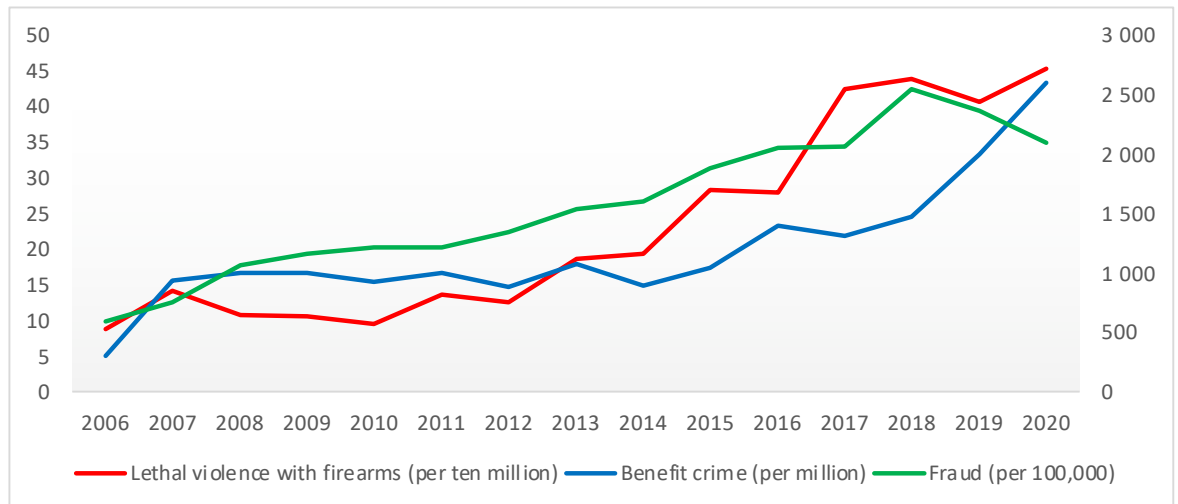


Figure 1. Reported offences for the years 2006-2020 for Benefit crime (per million inhabitants) and Fraud (per 100,000 inhabitants). Source: Brå. Confirmed cases of lethal violence with firearms for the years 2006-2020. Source: Brå and Sturup et al. 2018. The new Benefit Crimes Act (Bidragsbrottslagen 2007:612) entered into force on January 1, 2008. Before that, benefit offences were part of the Swedish penal code as frauds with special crime codes. This allows us to analyse levels of benefit offences for the period before 2008.

Implications and recommendations

What are the lessons learned from the Swedish crime paradox, namely the rise in organised crime, but not an equivalent rise in general crime, and what measures need to be implemented to counter organised crime? The response to the question can be divided into two components: local and global.

It may sound as a cliché, but although Sweden is a well-functioning, strong welfare country, it is important to point out that there are no quick fixes, at the same time that it is equally essential to articulate that the basic duties of law enforcement, i.e., detecting, and investigating criminal activities must be achieved to create conditions that will lead to protecting and securing civil society. At the local level, the most fundamental and crucial undertaking to be realized is that criminals are held accountable for their crimes and that the profit from crime will be diminished, ultimately leading to the financial destruction of both the criminal and its broader enterprise (e.g., Wheeler, Riddell, and Haberman 2021). Essentially, there is not enough external pressure on organised crime in Sweden and thereby not sufficient incentives for self-regulation within organized crime. One could even argue that the current situation with gun and explosive violence is beneficial for the more organized groups, such as the Outlaw motorcycle gangs, because the public and law enforcement attention is directed to control the visible violence and not the more invisible crime these groups are engaged in. Consequently, it is about increasing the external pressure, and thereby enforcing self-regulation of organized crime. The personal risk to the criminal and the cost for organised crime need to increase through higher clearing rates and a reduction in the profit from crime in terms of higher operational costs and increasing recovered proceeds from crime. It is not always about being tougher on

crime, but rather about being smarter. A promising solution can be the so-called precision policing, which combines predictive policing analysis with increased neighbourhood coordination to predict crime and then uses interventions from neighbourhood coordination officers to prevent crimes (Ashraf 2020; Chalfin, LaForest, and Kaplan 2021). However, some organisational measures can be implemented fairly quickly and have an impact when it comes to improving the fight against violence from organised crime groups without major investments. But, it requires progressive law enforcement.

“What are the lessons learned from the Swedish crime paradox, namely the rise in organised crime, but not an equivalent rise in general crime?”

As an example, in 2018, due to the challenges posed by organised criminal groups, the Swedish Police joined forces with the Rutgers University Miller Center for Community Protection and Resilience in order to assist in the development of best practices that would effectively work with vulnerable communities to reduce gun and explosives violence, as well as improve the clearance rates on gun violence investigations already underway. Several trips to Sweden and to the New Jersey State Police took place through 2019, in order to assess and assist in the crime-fighting needs of the Swedish

police. The conclusions were summarised in a final assessment report which was handed over to the Swedish Police in 2020 (Fuentes 2020). In this assessment, several areas of interest were noted: too few officers were dispatched to the scene of a shooting incident to adequately follow-up the investigative leads. The response was, at best, sporadic and uncoordinated. Even when responding to homicides, the response on the part of crime investigation and intelligence was often delayed. Similarly, for bomb response the reaction lacked critical coordination and, as a result, prevented a comprehensive and expert-driven investigative strategy. The remarkable fact is not what the assessment found and recommended, but what they did with the recommendation. The stark reply to this question is, not much was assessed nor made operational. It is believed that this was not about the content of the review, nor whether the recommendations were in fact impractical, but rather the Swedish Police lack appropriate training and strategic capability to turn knowledge into practice. As an example, in 2019 only 11 million Swedish kronor (equivalent to 1.1 million euros), which is less than 0.5 per thousand of the agency’s budget was invested in the agency’s Research and Development (Sarnecki 2021). Hence, it is urgent for Sweden to consider establishing one or several independent national centers, funded by the government, but with the independent task of assessing police actions from a broad perspective, covering impact, economic, ethical, and social aspects. This initiative could be complemented with the tasked of conducting relevant, applied research, such as organised crime, to help the Swedish law enforcement meet the challenges of the 21st century. At the same time, the Police have a significant need to devote resources to research and development that would improve the agencies’ abilities to suppress crime and build community relations. This

combined effort will contribute to a more robust and effective crime-fighting outcome, and improved management oversight and accountability, of which crime control in Sweden has a strong need.

Although many law enforcement tools and sanctions have been introduced by the Swedish government in recent years, more consideration should be given to investigating the introduction of proper anti-racketeering legislation to specifically target organised crime instead of general increase in punitive and covert coercive measures. Similar to the RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations), considering its importance in combating the mafia in the US.

“... European joint investigation teams need to counter the infrastructure of organised crime, whether it is weapons, drugs or the means of fraud.”

At the global level, the European and transatlantic joint operation that resulted in busting end-to-end encrypted communications platforms such as EncroChat illustrates the importance of European and international collaborations. Many guns and explosives that are used in violent crimes in Sweden find their way into the hands of organised crime groups, similarly to the illicit drug trafficking, by way of both land and marine shipments smuggled from elsewhere in Europe. Like the operation against EncroChat, European joint investigation teams need to counter the infrastructure of organised crime,

whether it is weapons, drugs or the means for fraud. In this matter, encouraged by Europol, the Swedish authorities need to invest more and have a stronger participation in international police cooperation (Polismyndigheten 2021a). As an example, existing cooperation and collaboration platforms within the EU, such as the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), should be prioritised in the appropriation directions for the government agencies, which is issued annually would promote the use of global solutions for local problems. This would also be co-funded, as resources are already available at EU level through earmarked funds to work on these initiatives.

The collaboration between the New Jersey State Police and the Swedish Police, facilitated by the Rutgers Miller Center for Community Protection and Resilience, was possible because of the progressive leadership and forces within both organisations, which in turn made it possible to connect police-to-police experts in ways other than relying on static inter-agency protocols and bureaucratic delays that often mismatched the needed expertise. The New Jersey-Stockholm collaboration was founded upon the use of subject-matter experts from American federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. Their interaction serves as an example on how to promote knowledge and best practices between police professionals on both continents. Therefore, there is a need that the international police community, beside joint investigations and operations, also encourages and supports this type of non-institutionalised, bottom-up international police-to-police and cross-professional cooperation exchanges for a mutually beneficial

collaboration (Rostami and Fuentes 2021). Together with stronger follow-up of crime prevention and control responses at the EU level, each member state can contribute with information sharing across intra-organisational boundaries, management accountability and oversight, as well as contribute thereby to more effective crime-fighting responses across Europe.

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