

Community Involvement in Crime Prevention

A National Report from Sweden



REGERINGSKANSLIET

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Crime trends

Since the end of World War II, Sweden, like many other West European countries, has experienced a marked increase in crime. During the period 1950–1990 the number of crimes reported to the police increased by approximately 500 per cent. Over the last decade, however, the number of crimes has remained relatively constant.

The explanation for the increase in crime is chiefly to be found in certain structural factors that Sweden has in common with other West European countries. Striking improvements in the standard of living and changed lifestyles have led to a sharp rise in the number of criminal offences. Urbanisation has led to increased anonymity and reduced social control. Norm systems have changed, as has the role of the family and schools.

Despite the increase in the number of crimes, the level of crime in Sweden remains low in comparison with most other West European countries. One reason for this is undoubtedly the contribution made by Swedish welfare policy, which has prevented large groups of persons from becoming socially marginalised. In addition, Swedish society has not lost control of some urban areas, as has happened in a number of other countries.

Nevertheless, crime is a problem. In Sweden, with a population of nine million, some 150,000 thefts from cars were reported in 1998. In the same year over 60,000 violent offences, nearly 50,000 car thefts, 13,000 burglaries from weekend and holiday homes, over 100,000 cycle thefts and 18,000 cases of breaking and entering were reported. To these offences can be added crimes related to motorcycle gangs, offences with racist overtones, "IT offences" and international crimes. This is quite enough to justify the further development of measures to counteract and prevent crime.

A national crime prevention programme

A good deal of the interest in criminal policy has long centred on questions concerning the efforts of the criminal justice system, such as, for example, the number of police and the length of prison sentences. Such factors are important but the major part of these resources are employed in dealing with the effects of crimes that have already been committed, when the damage has already been done. Both Swedish and international experience demonstrate that the police and other criminal justice agencies alone do not suffice to counteract crime. It is therefore important that every person and organisation able to exert an influence on the causes and opportunities for crime should take part in crime prevention activities.

In the spring of 1996 the Swedish Government presented a national crime prevention programme. The basis for the programme was worked out by a number of researchers and others with an interest in criminal policy. The main

conclusion drawn was that a considerably broader crime policy approach must be brought to bear in fighting crime than had previously been the case. What was needed, therefore, was an enhanced awareness of preventive efforts that could be undertaken by every sector of the community, and not just within the formal, narrow limits of traditional crime policy.

The national crime prevention programme, which is described in the publication *Our Collective Responsibility*, focuses on what is commonly called traditional criminality – thefts, fraud, violence and the infliction of damage. These kinds of offences dominate crime statistics and affect the individual in everyday life. The programme can be said to rest on three cornerstones.

Three cornerstones

Firstly, increased attention must be given to how societal developments, as well as political decisions concerning matters other than crime policy, can exert an influence on criminality. The responsibility for this must be borne by political decision-makers at all levels, but also by the business sector and individual business enterprises. Many different kinds of measures need to be considered – town and residential planning, the supervision of licensed premises and the manufacture of theft-proof vehicles, to give just a few examples.

The Government and Parliament have a special responsibility to consider the consequences for crime policy of new or changed regulations or new activities in the public sector. This should also apply to public authorities and local government bodies. The Government has therefore issued a directive to all committees of inquiry and persons appointed to conduct special inquiries, requiring them to analyse and describe the consequences of their recommendations for criminality and for the possibilities to prevent crime. This will ensure that in the future these aspects are given increased attention.

Secondly, it is essential to improve legislation and administrative activities within the crime policy sphere so as to make them more effective. This can be achieved by means of penal legislation and the work of the various criminal justice agencies and also, raising our sights somewhat, by measures taken in, for instance, schools and the social welfare services.

The publication devoted to the programme, then, was called *Our Collective Responsibility*. This title states an important point, namely, that everyone is capable of making an impact on the causes of, and opportunities for, crime, not least in their own immediate environment.

The third cornerstone therefore concerns the importance of making use of citizen involvement in crime prevention efforts.

This involvement can take place with advantage through collaboration between public authorities and citizens. The content and form of local collaborative endeavours of this kind naturally depend on local circumstances and conditions. Hence, it is impossible to set up generally applicable goals for local crime prevention work. However, the programme emphasises one idea that has met with general approval, namely, that each municipality should create a local crime prevention council as a contact point for individuals, enterprises, associations, organisations, the police and schools wishing to contribute to crime prevention.

Crime prevention strategies

The national programme puts forward three possible approaches for local efforts: Reducing opportunities to commit crime, reducing recruitment to criminal lifestyles and reducing criminal activity among persistent offenders.

Reducing opportunities to commit crime

A central focus in crime prevention must be to influence the opportunity structure, that is, to make crime more difficult to carry out, more risky and less profitable. This “situational prevention of crime” can be divided into measures that make it more difficult to carry out criminal acts, measures that heighten the risk of detection, measures that reduce the profitability of crime and measures that seek to make it more difficult to explain away criminal acts by saying, for example, “Everyone does it”.

Knowledge about when and where offences are committed and the circumstances that allow them to occur makes it possible to restrain much “everyday” crime. There is good reason to assert that greater responsibility than hitherto should be demanded of those who create opportunities for crime. This has long been the case in such areas as the prevention of damage to the physical environment, traffic accidents, the injurious effects of alcohol, fire prevention, etc. It is natural to lay the main responsibility for such work upon the political decision-makers and business sector that build, form and guide the underlying structures of social life through public authorities, organisations and private enterprises.

Reducing recruitment to criminal lifestyles

A very large amount of crime is the work of just a very small proportion of those who commit crimes. True, the proportion varies between different kinds of offences but on the whole and for the majority of serious offences such as, for example, breaking and entering and violent offences, it is possible to identify a group of constantly relapsing offenders who are disproportionately criminally active.

The most effective means of preventing the large amount of crime that is committed by constantly relapsing offenders is to prevent new recruits from entering upon such careers. The criminal career generally starts in early youth, usually before the age of criminal responsibility (15 years), with minor thefts and infliction of damage. The longer the deviant career persists, the harder it is to prevent its continuation by means of social or situational crime prevention measures. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance to prevent children and young people from being drawn into criminality at an early stage.

When young persons commit criminal acts, the community must react rapidly, clearly, concretely and consistently. The main emphasis in this work lies – and should continue to lie – outside the framework of the criminal justice system. So far as young people under the age of 15 are concerned, measures should in all essentials remain within the domain of the social welfare services.

In this context, special attention needs to be paid to the need for early intervention, that is, intervention focusing on children and young people in risk

environments and situations. Such intervention should seek to prevent, or at least to limit, subsequent unfavourable personal development. Consequently, the social welfare services should intensify efforts to develop methods of care and treatment for youngsters in the early stages of criminal development.

Reducing criminal activity among persistent offenders

The common factor for many of those who are active in traditional forms of crime is that they are almost continuously in some form of custody, care or treatment, usually within the jurisdiction of the prison and probation service. Any crime prevention strategy that seeks to hinder a continued criminal career can and should take this fact as its starting point.

One of the most important tasks for the prison and probation service is to influence offenders so that they do not relapse into crime. At the local level it is the probation service that is responsible for seeing that this task is performed in the best possible way. The service should strengthen its collaboration with other local bodies, notably the social services and the local police.

It is essential that the authorities share a common basic outlook on the treatment of persistent offenders, and that the exchange of knowledge and information between them grows. A combination of constructive measures in the form of education, work training and treatment for the misuse of alcohol and drugs, combined with active police work that charts, monitors and makes frequent strikes against the most criminally active, can reduce the crimes for which these people are responsible.

Organisational support

A National Crime Prevention Committee

The Government's crime prevention programme includes measures to be taken at central, regional and local levels. The main thrust of the programme concerns measures that support and promote local crime prevention initiatives. This is a matter for municipal authorities, private enterprises, organisations, associations and private citizens. To a great extent such work builds upon a more or less formal and more or less voluntary collaboration between all parties that are in a position to make an impact on crime.

In order to enable the intentions of the programme to be translated into reality, organisational support is required. For this reason a National Crime Prevention Committee was given the task of initiating, supporting and following up crime prevention work, primarily at the local level. The Committee's terms of reference required it, in consultation with the local authorities, to work for the appropriate organisation of local crime prevention initiatives and for the adoption of local crime prevention programmes.

The Crime Prevention Committee also allocated the financial resources that the national budget assigns to crime prevention activities. The Committee presented a final account of its work early in 1999. One of the more tangible results is that local crime prevention committees have been started in

municipalities all over the country. Their nature and the kind of activities carried out vary but a common feature is that they function as a meeting point at which representatives of the local government, the neighbourhood police, schools, local businesses, estate agents and others can work together to reduce crime and enhance public safety in the local community. In addition, the National Crime Prevention Committee has financed a large number of individual local projects.

The National Council for Crime Prevention

The National Council for Crime Prevention was set up in 1974. Its tasks then included co-ordinating the work against crime conducted by various societal bodies and, in collaboration with other authorities and organisations, achieving participation by all parties in crime prevention activities.

Since that time, the National Council's role has undergone certain changes. In accordance with the most recent, the National Council has evolved into a qualified expert body on crime policy questions with the special task of promoting crime prevention through development work, evaluation, applied research and the dissemination of information on crime policy issues. An important part of this work consists in producing essential information for the Government on measures and priorities for crime policy work and in evaluating measures previously taken. The National Council for Crime Prevention took over the National Crime Prevention Committee's duties from the beginning of 1999.

In order to support local crime prevention activities, the National Council set up a special division for this purpose. This division is required to promote local crime prevention initiatives by (a) working for the organisation of crime prevention activities and suitable forms of implementation; (b) initiating, supporting, following up and evaluating crime prevention projects; (c) collecting and disseminating information on successful projects and collaborative work; and (d) contributing to meeting the need for skilled training. An advisory group consisting of representatives from central public authorities, various organisations, the municipalities and the universities is attached to the division.

The Government has continued to allocate financial resources so as to further the creation of continuous, long-term and enduring crime prevention work. Special funds have been made available to reinforce crime prevention in the country's major cities.

The financial resources are used to stimulate and support structured and evidence-based crime prevention. The National Council for Crime Prevention provides assistance to research and development projects that can contribute to a long-term increase in knowledge. Special emphasis has been placed on projects that mobilise a number of different actors or create networks for local crime prevention work.

Best practice manuals

As a contribution to the development of knowledge, the National Council publishes writings on collaborative possibilities for reducing crime and enhancing public safety. These writings are published in a series that is directly intended for all those engaged in local crime prevention activities.

The first publication in the series deals with the ways in which a functioning organisation can be built up within a municipality and the tasks of a local crime prevention council. Guidance is given on who could participate and what role they could play. A description is also given of the form a municipal crime prevention programme can take and how a crime prevention action plan can be devised. Finally, some basic descriptions are given of different approaches to crime prevention, i.e., of social and situational prevention strategies.

The second publication describes in detail how to go about assessing local problems and the resources available. It also describes problem-oriented methods of work and illustrates how the use of different information sources and methods can create a basis for a comprehensive overview of local crime problems. Examples are given to show how surveys of this kind can be used to analyse the circumstances that make for the kinds of crime found in a local community and the ways in which these circumstances can be altered.

The third publication describes over 30 different crime prevention projects. The majority of these projects are Swedish but some examples have been taken from other parts of the world. The descriptions are relatively detailed and are intended to inspire and stimulate local initiatives. The various chapters of the publication deal with the different kinds of crimes or problems that the project sought to prevent. Finally, one chapter describes how local collaboration can be brought into play to reduce the incidence of relapsing among persistent offenders.

The fourth publication takes up the questions of follow-up and evaluation. One purpose of the publication is to stimulate those who are actively engaged in local crime prevention projects to document their activities so that others can learn from their experience. Another purpose is to improve knowledge about how to guarantee different kinds of effects. The various techniques used for follow-up and evaluation are described. A number of brief examples are given to show how follow-up and evaluation can be carried out in practice.

During 2000 the National Council for Crime Prevention plans to publish further reports in this series. One of these publications will describe how schools around the country have set up projects and activities to reduce offences and disturbances of good order and to improve the sense of security and wellbeing among pupils. An account is given of the various concrete measures that have contributed to increased parental attendance and involvement in school activities, and to reduced bullying, truancy and vandalism.

Another of the publications appearing during 2000 will describe in detail how different residential areas have developed networks for the reduction of crime and the enhancement of community safety. In part this is a question of traditional neighbourhood watch schemes and how these can be made to work well, but other forms of useful collaboration are also described, for example, between landlords and tenants.

Present situation and future challenges

Nearly four years have passed since the national crime prevention programme was first published. It was emphasised from the beginning that crime prevention requires long term involvement. It is abundantly clear that much has already been achieved. A great deal of positive activity has occurred and the experience gained provides a good basis for further steps to fulfil the intentions of the national programme.

An essential condition for effective crime prevention work is wholehearted governmental support. This support is not so much a matter of contributing to the funding of developmental and experimental crime prevention projects, undoubtedly valuable as it is. The most important proof of the Government's interest is that it develops effective, well-functioning forms of organisational support. In addition, the state can elaborate legislation and guide the work of public authorities so as to serve crime prevention aims.

Governmental support

The Swedish Government's involvement in crime prevention has been, and remains, substantial. The role of the National Council for Crime Prevention has been changed so as to focus on, and actively support, local crime prevention. Special resources are provided annually from the national budget to fund local experimental and developmental projects. Legislation is designed to provide the means public authorities and other parties need to prevent crime. The working methods of the various criminal justice agencies have been changed so as to enable them to better carry out their work both individually and in mutual collaboration, as well as through collaboration with authorities outside the field of criminal justice.

Local involvement

Another essential condition for effective, long-term crime prevention work is the existence of a local will to act and local involvement. During the four years that have passed since the national crime prevention programme was first presented, it can confidently be stated that local interest has been consistently in evidence. At the start of 2000, half of the country's municipal authorities had set up a local crime prevention council. A number of other municipalities have applied for a start-up grant. The aim is for two-thirds of the municipalities to have crime prevention councils by the end of 2000.

Local concern is also reflected in the fact that participation in the seminars, training sessions and conferences organised by the National Council for Crime Prevention shows continuous growth. There is considerable demand for information material on how to create a well-functioning organisation and how to make a start on projects and activities in practice. The majority of the country's 21 regional police authorities use the Best Practice Manuals to arrange training courses in interested municipalities. There is little doubt that crime prevention interests the general public and there is very substantial interest in taking part in crime prevention activities.

Access to knowledge

A third condition for successful crime prevention is access to knowledge about the measures that have the potential in the short or the long term to reduce crime and enhance community safety. The national crime prevention programme also emphasises that crime policy must be based on knowledge and realistic possibilities. Putting existing knowledge to use generates yet more knowledge. Clearly, therefore, there should be continued investment at central and local levels in a variety of research and development projects. Measures that are the subject of evaluations are of special value in this connection.

Gaps in knowledge that need to be filled concern especially social crime prevention, that is, the factors that make for the development of a criminal lifestyle and the measures that can be taken to counteract this development in the long term.

Since criminality is largely influenced by circumstances in societal sectors other than those falling under the criminal justice system, research is needed on, for instance, health care, schools, children and young people, social planning, traffic and the environment in order to ascertain the changes likely to make an impact on crime.

At the National Council for Crime Prevention a range of research and development projects are in progress with the aim of reinforcing crime prevention at central, regional and local levels. The re-organisation of police duties that has led to an emphasis on community and problem-oriented policing is currently being evaluated to ascertain its effect in counteracting everyday offences occurring locally. Several programmes to reduce recidivism undertaken by the prison and probation service are also undergoing follow-up and evaluation. The division within the National Council that is responsible for producing and disseminating crime statistics is presently developing ways of making them more accessible for local use, including making it possible to extract local crime statistics directly from the Internet. Only a few examples of current work can be given here; a full list would be impossibly long.

The fact that more knowledge is needed about what solutions work in relation to a range of different problems should not be seen as a reason not to act. Existing knowledge which has been gained from practical local experience, experimental projects, surveys and other kinds of research constitutes a sound foundation for achieving positive results in local crime prevention. Testing a measure that has been successful in one place by trying it in another place enables yet more knowledge to be gained. The essential model for crime prevention is learning by doing.

A necessary condition for learning by doing, however, is that information on what works well in crime prevention is disseminated effectively. A special division within the National Council is responsible for this task. Over and above the reports that are published and the conferences and courses that are arranged, funds have been allocated for a National Council home page on the Internet (www.bra.se). The home page contains an enumeration of all reports and other material that can be read, requested or downloaded. There is also a database utility in which a number of the local crime prevention councils are presented.



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