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Gangs of the North

In Sweden, gang-related crimes are on the rise. Under pressure from the right, the government reacts with tough measures

Read this article in German.

Swedish political debate is currently dominated by the discussion over recent gang-related violence. The surge in shootings and bomb attacks in Sweden's major cities, together with an extensive media coverage, have led the right-wing populist party Sweden Democrat, to pull up to the governing Social Democrats in the polls. The events have fuelled a debate on migration, despite falling rates of immigration. The social democratic-led government of Stefan Löfven is under a lot of pressure to act.

But while these crimes are undoubtedly hideous and the widespread use of explosives in gang disputes is unprecedented in Europe, the events have to be put into perspective to diffuse populist myths.

The increase in homicides in Sweden started around 2014, rose markedly and then settled the last years on a higher level than 2014. Put in perspective, today the total level of lethal violence is with around 1 per 100.000 inhabitants still on a clearly lower level than in the years around 1990, when Sweden recorded almost 1,5 murders per 100.000 inhabitants. Since then, there has been a decrease in other types of murder and manslaughter. Gang-related shootings now constitute a much larger proportion. Today, they account for up to 40 per cent of the total number of homicides – a threefold increase in all deadly shootings in a few years.

From a Nordic perspective, Sweden stands out when it comes to firearm homicides according to the *Nordic Homicide Report*. The total murder rate is however about the same as in the other countries and in international comparison quite low. Gang-related shootings and murders like in Sweden have not been reported on similar scale from the other Nordic countries. Denmark in the 1980s and 1990s had a number of killings between biker gangs, Hells Angels and Bandidos, but not on the same level.

Sweden's disadvantaged

Both the perpetrators and the victims in Sweden's gang wars are predominately young men from socially disadvantaged areas in the larger cities for the country. The suspects mostly have a migration background, but they have been born and raised in Sweden, representing the 2nd or 3rd generation of immigrants. As the Prime Minister Stefan Löfven recently pointed out, socio-economic factors are in part responsible.

Sweden is a deeply segregated society. Swedes with migrant backgrounds are often poorly integrated, live in socially deprived areas of the major Swedish cities and are trapped in a cycle of poverty, school failure and unemployment. These conditions did however not emerge overnight. They have crystallised over a long period time, questioning the amount of attention of Swedish that politics has paid to tackling integration problems.

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention has conducted interviews for a study with those involved in gang-related shootings. The study shows that the perpetrators have grown up with weak ties to their families, experienced bad schooling and are faced sometimes with financial problems. They see their future as quite bleak.

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Entering the criminal milieus is described as a form of socialisation rather than recruitment. The interview subjects did not regard themselves as gang members. Friendship and loyalty are important, but relations can quickly change into betrayal and result in assault and even murder. The quest for status is predominant. Violence is described as a currency useful in the competition for reputation vis-à-vis their peers. Gun violence has become an investment in one's own criminal career. Carrying a gun is seen as a means for personal protection. As a result, a viscous circle has ensued. Gun violence escalates and everyone feels being at risk and is constantly afraid.

Some of those interviewed report a feeling of being harassed by the police from an early age. The police force is perceived as having a legitimacy problem: those involved do not regard the police as serving their needs. Collaborating with the police risks leading to reprisals whilst not talking is a proof of loyalty. A culture of silence (*omerta*) is seen reigning in relation to authorities. This is a major factor in the low clearance rate of

gang related homicides. While the overall clearance rate of homicides in Sweden for a long time has been between 75 and 90 per cent, it is much lower in connection with the shootings at just above 20 per cent.

Drug turf wars

The shootings are to a large extent connected to the drug market. The report from the National Council for Crime Prevention states that 'the picture provided by the material is that drug sales, at different levels, constitute the dominant criminal activity in the milieu. Several interview subjects have also sold guns. Sales of both drugs and guns are repeatedly described as a job and the interview subjects underscore the need for knowledge and skill.' The road into selling drugs is easy. Cannabis is available and it is no big step to start using it and dealing. After a while, conflicts arise around customers and payments and the seller has to claim his territory.

Clear causes to the shootings are difficult to detect. Increased availability of firearms has been mentioned as a cause, but if so without further analysis of why there was a sudden increase. Possibly a few shootings for one reason or another started a circle of revenge and created the need to arm oneself for protection. The low clearance rate could also be an explanation for the continued shootings.

The drug market is often mentioned as a contributing cause of the shootings. It has also been reported that the shootings to a large extent take place where drugs are being sold. The question then, again, is why that market arose with such short notice. An ongoing process might have tipped the drug commerce in a more aggressive direction. The police authority has for a long time tried to clear the inner cities from dealers. The dealers then instead stay in their neighbourhoods, with people from the inner city or the middle-class suburbs coming to them to buy drugs.

Bombing as a trend

In addition to the shootings an upsurge in the bombing of houses, cars, etc. has occurred in Sweden. It has led to much political and media indignation and speculations and comparisons with war zones have been made by various political parties. These explosions are a more recent phenomena and not much is known either about the perpetrators or the motives.

A recent analysis by former EU parliamentarian Maria Robsahm underlines the following: The comparisons with war zones is totally out

of proportion. The number of third-party victims is low. Luckily, no one has been killed by the bombings during the last two years. The statistics on what should be regarded as a blast is unclear and local police forces sometimes have much wider definitions than the Official Swedish Criminal Statistics.

The connection between the shootings and the drug market has been observed. Two opposite strategies could possibly be deducted from this, decriminalisation or increased criminalisation.

Explosions, if more than a firework, can legally be defined as a crime involving public danger. The by far most common crime here used to be arson and other types of dangerous fires. Interestingly, the cases of arson have decreased, particularly in the large cities. A hypothesis could be that the illegal use of explosives has replaced arson as a means of threats or revenge in gang-related crime. Many of the bombs have been directed against shady businesses of rival gangs.

Law and order as a response by the state

The political response to the shootings has been additional penal legislation and a promise of 10000 new police officers. The government plans to introduce a list of measures aimed at criminalising or increasing punishment for gang-related crimes such as inducing young people to commit crime, smuggling of weapons, serious violent crimes, interference in a judicial matter, protecting a criminal and organised theft as well as burglary. Other changes that have been discussed and called for by the right-wing opposition parties are the criminalisation of crimes in relation to criminal disputes, a doubling of sentences for gang-related criminality and the right of the police to conduct on the spot stop-and-searches in certain areas without a suspicion of crime.

The connection between the shootings and the drug market has been observed. Two opposite strategies could possibly be deducted from this, decriminalisation or increased criminalisation. The most restrictive Swedish drug policy where the police make 37000 tests of body liquids per year for establishing illegal consumption has increased the tension between the police and minority groups. With up to 1000 police officers engaged in this practice.

The question arises though if the scant police resources could not be used for other more pressing tasks. The government has, however, chosen the criminalisation strategy. The police has been instructed to increase the

focus on drug dealing and an increase in the severity of the penalty for the sale and buying of drugs has been announced. It remains to be seen if this strategy brings peace to Swedish streets or if a further escalation ensues.



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