



# Unlawful influence on public agency personnel

A follow-up



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English summary of Brå report 2016:13

**The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) –  
centre for knowledge about crime and crime prevention measures**

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) works to reduce crime and improve levels of safety in society by producing data and disseminating knowledge on crime and crime prevention work.

This report is a summary of the Swedish report  
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# Summary

This study is based on a survey directed to all civil servants at the Swedish Public Employment Service, the Swedish Courts, the Swedish Economic Crime Authority, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, the Chancellor of Justice, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, the Swedish Enforcement Authority, the Swedish Coast Guard, the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Police Authority, the Swedish Customs, the Swedish Prosecution Authority, ST's Unemployment Insurance Fund, and IF Metall's Unemployment Insurance Fund. Lay judges were also included in the study. The survey was sent to a selected number of individuals at the Swedish Tax Agency and a selected number of Lay judges. A total of slightly more than 45,500 civil servants responded to the survey during the summer of 2015. This is both a form of follow-up on, and an expansion of, a previous study from 2005 (Brå 2005:18). The nature of the expansion is that this survey is significantly larger, both in terms of the number of respondents and the number of investigated organisations.

The study addresses unlawful influence from external customers and clients, i.e. harassment, threats, violence, vandalism, and corruption where the victim perceives the purpose being to *influence* the discharge of official duties. There is a risk that certain individuals who are exposed to threats are eager to talk about it, even though the purpose of the incident was not to influence the discharge of official duties. The incident may instead involve a mere expression of dissatisfaction on the part of an external customer or client. Accordingly, there is a risk that too many incidents have been reported in this survey. In order to reflect the same reference period as the 2005 study, the questions refer to the most recent 18 months. Additionally, approximately 140 civil servants at the aforementioned organisations have been interviewed. For information regarding reply frequency, delineations, and so forth, please see the methodology section. The following is a summary of general results.

## Public Authority Sweden

Every public body in Sweden which is not a decision-making political body is a public authority. The Swedish public authorities comprise the Government, the courts, and the administrative agencies. In many cases, a public authority is formed to perform tasks for which a municipality or the State is responsible, including making decisions regarding the benefits, rights, and obligations of individuals.

Administrative authorities comprise all municipal and national authorities with the exception of the courts and the Government. Sweden has a wealth of public authorities. In 2017, there were 444 national authorities

in Sweden – 240 administrative authorities, four authorities under the auspices of the Parliament, three State public service companies, six public pension system funds, 84 courts (including the National Courts Administration), and 107 Swedish public authorities abroad. In addition to these, municipalities also have public authorities.

## Unemployment insurance fund

The primary task of an unemployment insurance fund is to administer and pay unemployment compensation to people without work. There are 28 unemployment insurance funds in Sweden, each with an operating area covering a specific job category or industry. While many unemployment insurance funds are linked to trade unions, membership in an unemployment insurance fund does not require membership in a trade union, and vice versa. In 2015, 71 per cent of Sweden's labour force belonged to an unemployment insurance fund.

In the study, the participating organisations are broken down into five groups: supervisory and regulatory authorities, paying agencies, criminal investigative agencies, adjudicative bodies, and enforcement authorities. These categories also illustrate how the work carried out by the organisations is connected in a chain.

## Exposure varies widely

The percentage of respondents who state that they have been exposed to unlawful influence during the most recent 18 months varies widely among the organisations (see table 1). The percentage of exposed individuals is lowest among the lay judges (4 per cent) and greatest at the Chancellor of Justice (71 per cent).

**Table 1. Number of respondents and percentage exposed to harassment, violence, vandalism, and improper offers or relationships, during the most recent 18 months. The figures refer to the number of respondents at each organisation. Each individual is reported only one time in the table (although the same individual may have been exposed to, e.g., both threats and harassment). Exposed individuals are stated as a percentage.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage exposed individuals
Swedish Tax Agency	1,373	31
Swedish Migration Agency	3,051	49
Swedish Coast Guard	239	29
Swedish Customs	1,272	24
Swedish Public Employment Service	7,465	42
Swedish Social Insurance Agency	8,887	31
IF Metall's Unemployment Insurance Fund	97	64
ST's Unemployment Insurance Fund	25	36
Swedish Economic Crime Authority	431	17
Swedish Police	9,813	36
Swedish Prosecution Authority	1,016	43
Swedish Courts	3,535	37
Lay judges	1,832	4
Chancellor of Justice	28	71
Swedish Prison and Probation Service	5,016	44
Swedish Enforcement Agency	1,448	61

## Exposed individuals were exposed on very few occasions

Unlawful influence is generally uncommon. Of those respondents who were exposed to harassment, 69 per cent stated that it *happened at some point or a few times each year*. The attempt to influence was customarily directed towards the civil servant personally.

Harassment is the most common form of unlawful influence at all organisations. This is consistent with the 2005 study but, for several organisations, harassment as the primary form of exposure has become even clearer. Other forms of influence are proportionally less common than harassment. One common denominator for exposed occupations is that they often entail extensive contact with external customers and clients. In general, the exposed occupations also have a greater element of more *in-depth encounters* with the same customer or client. The way that harassment is expressed varies among the organisations but some of the most common forms include disturbing telephone calls, abusive language, and suicide threats.

Threats are the second most common form of unlawful influence at all organisations. Unlike harassment, the occupations exposed to threats have greater elements of more *long-term exposure* to the same external customer or client. The occupation with the greatest frequency of individuals who experience exposure to threats comprises civil servants who work with intervention activities at the Police Authority (57 per cent).

## Violence and vandalism are uncommon

Violence is less common than harassment and threats. A common feature of organisations which are exposed is that a large percentage of the job tasks are characterised by intervention and control. The organisation with the greatest percentage of respondents who state that they have been exposed to violence (13 per cent) is the Policy. Exposed respondents at the Police state that the most common forms of violence are hitting and kicking. At organisations where the job tasks are overwhelmingly administrative in nature, such as the Public Employment Service and the Migration Agency, the most common forms of violence are pushing or similar forms of minor violence.

Vandalism as a form of influence is also generally uncommon. At the same time, the study shows that there are agencies and occupational groups who state that they are exposed to vandalism a higher rate than others, with the Police Authority (7 per cent) and the Migration Agency (7 per cent) being the most exposed agencies. Exposed civil servants at agencies with primarily administrative tasks state that vandalism is directed primarily at the agency. Agencies where a large number of task comprise intervention and control instead state that the most common form of vandalism is vandalism of official vehicles.

## Primarily trivial offers

The percentage of respondents who received improper offers also varies among organisations and is greatest at the Migration Agency (7 per cent). One new element that was not included in the 2005 study is that the respondents were also asked whether they were exposed to attempts at

improper friendships. This percentage is also the greatest at the Migration Agency (6 per cent). The survey seems to capture particularly small offers where the element of impropriety is not obvious. It involves attempts at “everyday corruption” and common forms of offers of meals or material gifts. It may also involve improper offers of money.

### **Influence is believed to be motivated by different goals**

Although we are limited to the exposed person’s perception of the person exercising influence, one can see certain similarities and differences in respect of various persons who exercise influence. The purpose of the attempt to influence may differ, but it appears that in most cases the purpose is to achieve activity or passivity, such as getting a certain decision taken or avoiding an intervention. Taken as a whole, the most common types of persons exercising influence are individuals who are perceived as being in a desperate situation or having a psychological problem. In the exposed individuals’ experience, both of these types of persons exercising influence use unlawful influence to improve their situation or a specific decision, for example by allusions to taking their own life or the civil servant’s life. It also happens that irate citizens, such as family, friends, or witnesses, attempt to influence the outcome of another party’s matter by harassing the civil servants. Attempts to influence involve attaining passivity by using abusive language, or by filming or photographing the individual.

The exposed persons perceive that litigious individuals, extremists, and activists are more driven by facts. The first group wants justice and, in their attempts to influence, pose demands and use systematic methods to achieve the goal. Examples of harassment include repeated telephone calls and letters demanding a level of service far beyond that which is required. The latter two groups focus more on the organisation than on the individual civil servant in order to express their dissatisfaction. They are therefore more likely to resort to vandalism than other persons exercising influence.

Persons active in organised crime or suburban-based networks and youth gangs do not want the organisations to have any insight into their criminal activities. They attempt to frighten civil servants into passivity through subtle threats against their private lives, by outnumbering them, and so forth. These types of more considered strategies are applied by businesses and suppliers as well. There, however, the motivating factor is to attain a favoured position with the civil servant by using gifts and flattery in the attempt to influence.

Since this study includes a significantly greater number of interviews with the victimised civil servants than the 2005 study, it gives us a clearer picture of the perception of persons exercising influence. One important result is that the civil servants can act in various ways when encountering persons exercising influence and show greater understanding and empathy for some of them. Above all, this involves persons exercising influence who act in an emotionally heightened state, particularly psychologically troubled individuals and addicts.



## Higher reporting frequency for concrete attempts to influence

An important question for safety management is in the extent to which the organisation learns of any attempts to influence. At most of the organisations, violence and vandalism are reported more frequently than improper offers and harassment, and threats lie somewhere in the middle. This is consistent with the results from 2005. The tendency to report varies greatly among the organisations and forms of influence. Although there are significant differences in levels, the pattern is the same for all organisations. Approximately one-third of harassment incidents are reported in most organisations. More than one-half, and in many cases over two-thirds, of the respondents report violent incidents. Incidents which are reported to the police follow the same pattern. In particular, violent incidents are reported to the police, but some organisations also report threats.

The victims report primarily to their immediate supervisors, but reports are also commonly made via the incident reporting systems. In the event of harassment and threats, serious incidents are those which are primarily internally reported and reported to the police. The interviews identify subtle or direct threats against family members or the civil servant's private sphere as typical examples of serious incidents. Also included are personal assault, incidents which cause actual damage, and times when the person exercising influence is perceived as serious and can carry through on the threat. Incidents which are perceived as everyday incidents or empty threats are not reported.

## Greatest need of support in the event of violence

One new feature in this study which was not included in the 2005 study is that the exposed persons were asked whether they had received support from the organisation as a consequence of the incident. The survey results show that most of them receive the support they need. Civil servants who were exposed to violence stated the greatest need for support as a result of the incident. Some types of vandalism and threat also appear to require more support than most forms of harassment. Approximately one-third of the exposed persons in many organisations stated that they did not receive as much support as they requested. This group states that it experiences a lesser degree of safety than do their colleagues. According to the results, they also appear to be more subject to influence when making decisions. Bearing in mind that we do not know how safe these individuals felt before they were exposed, the result nevertheless speaks for the proposition that identifying and prioritising this group is a central task for employers.

The requested support is often purely compassionate in nature. In particular, colleagues and the direct supervisor play important roles. They become frames of reference to interpret the incident, to determine whether it was an attempt to influence, whether it should be reported, and how to act afterwards. They may help by providing advice both in difficult situations and in the subsequent case management. Victimised interview subjects also highlight how important it is that colleagues and supervisors listen and not trivialise the incident. In addition, the supervisor holds the key to the rest of the organisation regarding safety management measures and other more professional help, if necessary.

## **Is the discharge of official duties influenced?**

The survey contains three questions regarding the consequences of the incident, which bear on how the discharge of official duties is actually influenced by the attempted influence. Although this is a very sensitive question and perhaps something which the victims may not want to admit to themselves, much less to Brå in a survey, it does hint at the consequences. Regardless of the organisation and the form of influence, most state that they were not influenced to hesitate before taking measures, to avoid situations, or to act in a way which could call into question the discharge of official duties. Hesitation or avoidance of situations was most common. Approximately 10-20 per cent of the victims stated that they did so at some point as a result of an attempt to influence. Essentially all interviewed individuals indicated great integrity, a sense of duty, and pride in their work. This can be discerned by, for example, their repeated references to the fact that decisions were not changed as a result of the attempt to influence. Having been personally exposed can strengthen one's will to stand up for one's profession and the discharge of one's duties.

As indicated by the aforementioned inclination to report, these metrics also show that violence leads to the most serious consequences. This is followed by vandalism for some authorities and threat for others. Those cases in which vandalism has a significant influence probably involve more serious incidents, such as vehicles being attacked with stones. The fact that violence is thought to lead to the most serious consequences is one difference from the 2005 study. At that time, harassment was the primary form which actually influenced the discharge of official duties. An additional observation is that compared with 2005, an equal or lower percentage of civil servants stated negative consequences of unlawful influence in this survey. This applies to most organisations and forms of influence.

According to the interview subjects, the official duties whose discharge can be called into question as a result of attempts to influence tend to be tasks which fall somewhat outside of the scope of the main task. For example, this may involve issuing a negative decision on the primary matter but refraining from reporting and investigating matters which can be designated as tangential. Moreover, the bar for commencing investigations may be set higher when, for example, investigating persons who are known to exercise influence or persons who are reminiscent of persons who exercised influence previously. Other examples include situations which the employer finds difficult to handle or which are similar to situations where the employer has stated that concerns for the safety of civil servants render it acceptable to deviate from normal routines.

The responses to the survey also indicate that the attempt to influence leads more respondents to be influenced in their private lives or to consider quitting their jobs than to hesitate in the discharge of their official duties. In other words, the greatest challenge is to the civil servants' health and private lives, rather than the discharge of official duties.

## **Brå's assessment**

### **Is exposure to unlawful influence increasing?**

There are several methodological differences between the 2005 study and the 2015 survey, but we can note that the experience of unlawful influence

has increased, particularly in respect of harassment. Several explanations for this result come forth in interviews, including, among other things, a tougher attitude from external customers and clients, and increased safety management within several organisations during the past ten years. The latter may have led to lower tolerance for, and increased awareness of, attempts to influence. This would entail that the same incident today, for example inducing feelings of guilt, would be more likely to be designated an attempt to influence than it would have been ten years ago.

### **The organisations can learn from each other**

Like the 2005 study, this study shows that the level of exposure varies between the organisations. As was the case previously, there are also great similarities; to name a few, the attempts to influence look similar, as do the consequences for exposed civil servants. There are also examples of common risk situations, such as prior to, and in conjunction with, negative decisions. The challenge for all organisations is to obtain reports about what is happening so that they can take preventive actions as well as countermeasures.

The result illustrates that the organisations have much to gain by continuing to cooperate with each other and expanding the group of cooperation partners. Since this study is significantly more comprehensive than the 2005 study, this report identifies new possibilities for cooperation among the organisations. The study shows, for example, that unemployment funds may have a great deal in common with other paying agencies, such as the Social Insurance Agency and the Public Employment Service. This applies particularly with respect to the forum in which the attempt to influence is made. The same thing applies to agencies with control and intervention activities, such as Customs, the Police, the Prison and Probation Service, and the Coast Guard. They meet external customers and clients face to face to a greater extent.

Internal cooperation at the organisations is also necessary. Unlawful influence must not be reduced to a safety issue. In particular, the personnel function plays an important role. There is also a clear relationship between how the work is performed and the risks of unlawful influence, which means that it is advantageous to integrate safety issues into operational planning. For example, waiting times, the way in which decisions are worded, and whether one works alone or together with a colleague can influence opportunities for attempts to influence.