



## Emergency phones for people at risk

*A follow-up of their  
use and effectiveness*



# Emergency phones for people at risk

A follow-up of their  
use and effectiveness

English summary of Brå report 2015:7

**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 Larmtelefoner för  
hotade, report no 2015:7. The Swedish report can be ordered from  
Brottsförebyggande rådet, [info@bra.se](mailto:info@bra.se)

**Production:**

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå)  
Box 1386, SE-111 93 Stockholm, Sweden  
Tel: +46 (0)8 401 87 00, fax: +46 (0)8 411 90 75  
E-mail: [info@bra.se](mailto:info@bra.se)  
Brå on the internet: [www.bra.se](http://www.bra.se)

© Brottsförebyggande rådet 2015  
URN:NBN:SE:BRA-589

# Summary

In April 2010, the Government decided to commission the National Police Board to guarantee the provision of personal emergency phones and protection packages to victims of persecution. The goal was to strengthen the protection of people at risk and to create more uniform conditions across Sweden for receiving this type of protection. In connection with this, more modern equipment was procured. The National Police Board was to make this equipment available to the police authorities.

The protection package includes an emergency phone with GPS functionality and a recording unit for telephone calls. In addition, the police can offer the individual a “shrill alarm”. This, however, is not a solution provided by the National Police Board. The technical equipment can be loaned to the “protectee” after the police have established the existence of such a need.

In December 2013, The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) was commissioned by the Government to follow up

- how well the emergency phones are being made available
- the extent to which they have come into practical use and averted danger
- how the phones have affected victims’ sense of security and confidence in the criminal justice system.

To carry out the commission, the National Council for Crime Prevention used a form to obtain information from all Sweden’s police authorities and conducted interviews with police employees at seven police authorities. The National Council also sent out questionnaires and interviewed former protectees. In this way, just over 100 persons have been consulted on their experience of having an alarm telephone.

The following summarises the responses to each of the Government’s questions.

## How well are the emergency phones being made available?

In spring 2014, there were a total of 848 emergency phones available at all the police authorities in Sweden. The proportion of phones in use by a protectee within each police authority area at any given time ranged between zero and 89 per cent. Overall, 44 per cent of the emergency phones were in use, and 39 per cent were ready to be used. The remaining phones were reported as faulty, being serviced, on loan to non-protectees or not possible to account for. During the period 2010–2013, an emergency phone had been loaned in a total of 1,993 cases nationwide.

### *Emergency numbers in mobile phones are still used*

Viewed across the entire period, just over half of Sweden's police authorities offered to install an emergency number in protectees' own mobile phones instead of issuing the emergency phone supplied by the National Police Board. There has, however, been a decrease in the total use of this particular form of protection. In 2013, only eight authorities reported cases in which emergency numbers had been used. Reasons for programming an emergency number into a mobile phone instead of issuing an emergency phone are technical problems with the phones and the convenience of users only needing to handle and carry their own mobile phone.

### *The police offers shrill alarms where the risk is not great enough to issue an emergency phone*

Shrill alarms are issued either as a complement to an emergency phone or where the threat is not serious enough for an emergency phone. Only eight authorities have been able to account for the number of shrill alarms issued. The total number of shrill alarms issued by these eight authorities is just over one thousand. This suggests a fairly high incidence of the police also offering some form of support and protection to persons exposed to a somewhat lower risk.

### *Recording units are almost never used*

There are (spring 2014) a total of 163 recording units at Sweden's police authorities. Only four of these were loaned to protectees during the period 2010–2013. The reasons for this non-use of the recording unit are that it is designed to record conversations on a landline telephone, while the majority of protectees have a mobile phone, and that the unit is too complicated to use.

### *The number of emergency phones covers the known need ...*

The predominant view is that there are a sufficient number of emergency phones at the different police authorities to cover the

known need. Periodically, however, they may be in short supply if several phones are being fixed or serviced at the same time, and there are often long waiting periods to get the phones back after servicing.

*... but it is uncertain whether such needs are always identified*

Another question is whether the possible need for an emergency phone is always identified when a police report is made. A protection case usually begins as a report to the police of violence or threats, but those whose duties are to provide victims with support and protection have differing views on whether those who register police reports always have the skills required to assess the threat and whether they know about the availability of emergency phones. If these skills and knowledge are lacking, there is a risk of missing cases where there is a need for protection. However, the view of the ten authorities that introduced a new support function in the RAR<sup>1</sup> system is that the cases which should receive attention do receive such attention. This RAR support function requires the person receiving a report about a certain type of offence to answer the question of whether there is a threat that demands further measures. The support function saw national introduction in RAR in mid-December 2014.

## **Have the emergency phones come into practical use and averted danger?**

For the period 2010–2013, 19 of Sweden's 21 police authorities show a total of 158 actual uses of an emergency phone. This is just under 10 per cent of the total number of cases in which an emergency phone had been issued in that same period. The vast majority have thus not used their phone to alert the police.

*Two of ten suspects arrested after a protectee alarm*

The most common alarm situation involves a suspect banging at the protectee's door. Other common situations described involve the suspects following the protectee by car or having been seen outdoors. When police arrive at the location, they usually look for the suspect, register a report if there is an offence to report and/or make sure that the protectee gets to safety. In many cases, the suspect has disappeared from the location when the police arrive. In one fifth of all cases reported to the National Council, it has been possible to arrest suspects and take them to the police station.

---

<sup>1</sup> RAR, Rationell anmälningsrutin (Rational Report Routine), is a computerised system in which offences and incidents are entered.

## How have the emergency phones affected the victims' sense of security and confidence in the criminal justice system?

An emergency phone gives protectees a greater sense of security both outdoors and indoors/at home. For many, the emergency phone is the decisive factor in whether they dare to go out at all and are able to live an almost normal life. Thanks to the emergency phone, protectees have not been as isolated as they had been without the phone, which has in turn contributed to their being able to start rebuilding their lives. For many, the emergency phone and their contact with the police employees responsible for managing the phones and protection served as confirmation that the police had taken them and their situation seriously. This has strengthened the self-confidence of some and helped give them the strength to move forwards.

### *The opportunity for rapid assistance creates a sense of security*

Protectees relate that what creates their sense of security is the opportunity to call for help if something happens. However, they believe that the emergency phone does not in itself constitute any protection against the fact that something *can* happen. In the cases where the protectee triggered an alarm with the emergency phone, and in the cases where it triggered itself,<sup>2</sup> the police have arrived at the location quickly, which has strengthened the sense of security among the protectees in question.

### *GPS has not always led police all the way*

In the cases where the interviewed protectees triggered an alarm with the emergency phone, intentionally or unintentionally, the police have in some cases been unable to reach the protectee. In some of the cases, the police have gone to the protectee's home address even though the protectee was somewhere else with his/her phone. In other cases, the GPS has led the police to the right part of the city, but they have then had to ask the protectee about their exact location and to describe what they look like.

### *Good treatment and response creates confidence*

Several protectees have experience of having made several police reports before they received their emergency phone. They can give accounts of both good and bad treatment and responses from the police officers who have registered their reports. Many describe their confidence in the police as having varied depending on the treatment and response they have received.

---

<sup>2</sup> Due to technical problems with the phone.



All, however, agree that they have received extremely good treatment once they have actually come into contact with the police employees whose duties are to offer support, assistance and protection. Thanks to this, many people's confidence in the police has been strengthened. Both in questionnaires and in interviews, several respondents emphasise the gratitude they feel towards the police employees with whom they have had contact during the period they had an emergency phone. In some cases, this contact is described as vital.

## The National Council's assessment

The most striking result of the study in the National Council's opinion is how positive the individuals who had the chance to borrow an emergency phone are about the initiative. The emergency phone has made them feel that the police take them seriously and has made them less afraid. Despite the fact that a minority of protectees in the study have needed to use the emergency phone, almost all think that the phone has played a great part in increasing their sense of security. They describe how having the emergency phone has helped them dare to leave their apartment and live a more normal life. Those who have triggered an alarm with the phone are also very satisfied with the police's actions and treatment when they have arrived. It should, however, be noted here that a relatively large number of protectees did not respond to the questionnaire. And the National Council has been unable to assess the extent to which the non-response is biased.

Against this background, it becomes especially important in the National Council's opinion for the goal of the Government's investment in emergency phones to be actually realised. The goal of the 2010 decision for the National Police Board to make emergency phones available to the police authorities was to guarantee the provision of such technical protection to victims of persecution and threats. The conditions for receiving technical protection were to become more uniform across Sweden. The National Council's evaluation indicates that this objective has still not been completely realised. The police authorities have procured and issued emergency phones to a varying extent, and a couple of the authorities hardly use them at all.

### **Why do some police authorities issue so few emergency phones?**

Why do some police authorities issue so few emergency phones? The evaluation process has uncovered several different arguments *against* the use of emergency phones from the authorities that issue them to a small extent. Each of these is discussed below.

The two authorities that use emergency phones to the least extent mainly justify this by reference to their lack of trust in the technology. It is difficult for the National Council to evaluate this argument against emergency phones with any degree of certainty. It may be noted, however, that the other authorities state that there were initial problems with the technology, but that now the emergency phones essentially function well. In addition to this, 90 per cent of the approximately 100 protectees in the study who had an emergency phone responded that the phone had functioned as it should.

A more general criticism is that emergency phones do not provide *real* protection, even if the technology is functioning. In the case of an acute violent incident, the police cannot arrive in time to protect the victim. According to this line of argument, the emergency phone creates a false sense of security. Another argument put forward is that a large proportion of the protectees do not run any real risk of exposure to violence. According to advocates of this latter argument, a more appropriate solution would be for the police to give clear information that the risk of victimisation is low. If this information is based on the results of a structured assessment of threat and risk, the protectees are expected to be able to feel secure without an emergency phone.

On the basis of the interview study, The National Council believes that these arguments against emergency phones can be called into question. It is correct that the phone would probably not be able to prevent an acute, unanticipated situation of violence. This is also something that all the interviewed protectees are aware of. None of those interviewed had been exposed to such violence while they had the emergency phone. This also indicates that they have not exposed themselves to situations that were dangerous, even though they had the opportunity to alert the police.

It may also be correct that the probability of really being exposed to violence is not very high for some of the protectees who have had the chance borrow an emergency phone. This is supported by the fact that few protectees in the study have needed to use their emergency phone to alert the police. But it is also known from previous studies that persons exposed to violence and threats often feel insecure for a long subsequent period. This was found both in this study and in the National Council's previous survey of 176 persons protected by restraining orders (Brå 2007). Several persons mention the fact that the sense of insecurity, stemming from many years of victimisation, still persists even though their actual situation has improved or even though it has been a long time since anything has happened.

The fact that the police can then issue emergency phones to help reduce their fear and increase their sense of security is something that the National Council views as very positive. This assessment

is based on the fact that, regardless of how great the actual risk was, the sense of security that having an emergency phone produced for the protectees has very often been a prerequisite for their being able to get back into their everyday routines, go to work and have a social life. Overall, the National Council finds that the above indicates that there may be grounds for the police authorities that rarely issue emergency phones to review their practice.

### **Withdrawal of an emergency phone can be a sensitive matter**

Another objection raised against emergency phones is the risk that protectees get accustomed to having an emergency phone and feel even more insecure than before when the police withdraw it. This is also something that does not find support in the National Council's survey. It does emerge that returning the emergency phone *is* a critical matter and that many protectees found it tough to forgo it. But this does not overshadow their positive experience of having had an emergency phone. None of the respondents state that they felt *more* insecure afterwards than they did before they had the chance to borrow the phone.

However, there is reason to point out the importance of the police handling the withdrawal of the emergency phone as sensitively as possible and adapting this to the circumstances of each individual case. One idea might also be to adopt the procedure of following up and asking how the protectee is getting on by calling him/her at certain time after the emergency phone was returned to the police.

### **The new RAR support function may require follow up**

In order to initiate an emergency phone case, there must be some recognition of the potential need for such protection. Several of the police employees responding to the National Council's questionnaire believe that the individuals who register police reports are not sufficiently qualified when it comes to recognising that the individual reporting the offence may need technical protection. Hopefully, the new question in RAR regarding the existence of a possible threat may alleviate this problem. However, it is important for the change to be combined with training for those who register offence reports about what to consider when answering this question. The National Council believes that there may be reason to follow up how well the new RAR support function works once it has been in use for some time.

The Safer Sweden Foundation<sup>3</sup> has put forward the idea that in cases where the question of a possible threat is answered with a *Yes* in RAR, the individual reporting the offence should be informed of the procedures and measures that the police have an obligation to initiate. This may involve information on the police's duty to carry out structured assessments of threat and risk, and that on the basis of their results, the individual reporting the offence may have the opportunity to receive an emergency phone, among other things. According to the Safer Sweden Foundation, this could serve as "a kind of quality assurance in cases where the police are not fulfilling their obligations".

### **More uniform procedures may be needed to assess who should receive an emergency phone**

In an inspection conducted in 2012, the National Police Board found that there is a lack of clear procedures for when it is appropriate to equip a crime victim with an emergency phone (RPS 2012b). The National Council's study indicates that this problem still exists. The National Council has tried to find out how the various authorities make their assessment and the risk criteria used to determine whether or not an emergency phone is issued. The picture which emerges is that a structured assessment of threat and risk is usually, but not always, conducted, and that this is supplemented by a "gut feeling" in the individual case. Several of the police employees interviewed think that evaluations of the need for protection may vary somewhat between different police authorities. This variation would probably depend both on the thoroughness of threat and risk assessments and on differences in how high the risk of violence must be considered to be in order to issue an emergency phone.

At this point, there is reason to highlight the risks and opportunities resulting from the new organisation of the Swedish Police. The risk is that the skills relating to the protection of persons and crime victims may be lost in the reorganisation. On the other hand, the new opportunities that arise relate to improved national management of personal protection and more learning between regions.

### **The technical problems must be taken seriously**

Although the National Council has not found that the technical problems are so great as to threaten the system of emergency phones, it is nevertheless important to take the problems seriously. This particularly applies to the problems with GPS positioning de-

---

<sup>3</sup> The idea was put forward by Magnus Lindgren of the Safer Sweden Foundation (Stiftelsen Tryggare Sverige) in connection with his review of this report.

scribed by the interviewed protectees. There may be reason for the Swedish Police to conduct a more comprehensive investigation of the technical problems that exist and to see what can be done to eliminate them.

One argument that some authorities put forward against emergency phones is that they are too unwieldy and that it is more convenient for protectees to have an emergency number installed in their own mobile phone. It is possible that some protectees prefer this solution. However, this does not provide the opportunity to locate the protectee using GPS, as is the case with emergency phones.

### **Positive that the emergency phones rarely need to be used**

One of the Government's questions is the extent to which the emergency phones come into practical use. In the National Council's opinion, it is good that such a small proportion of the protectees in the study have needed to use the emergency phones to alert the police in a dangerous situation and that the police arrived at the location quickly when these persons had in fact alerted them. The perception of quite a lot of the protectees who, according to the questionnaire, triggered an alarm with their emergency phones is also that it actually averted the threat, while others have more cautiously replied that it had partially done so. The National Council's review indicates that the protectees have in most cases alerted the police before the threat had developed to the extent that the situation was acutely dangerous. The study found no cases in which the protectee had been physically injured in the alarm situation.

### **Is the target group the same as for restraining orders?**

Considering how much receiving an emergency phone means to protectees, it is interesting to study the relationship between restraining orders and decisions on emergency phones. A large proportion – about half – of those applying for a restraining order are turned down after an assessment is made regarding the risk of victimisation and the intrusion into the restrained person's freedom. An earlier study conducted by the National Council shows that a large proportion of those who were turned down still felt persecuted and threatened a long time after this (Brå 2007). Some authorities view a restraining order decision almost as a prerequisite for granting an emergency phone, while other authorities do not see this as a requirement.

The National Council believes that there may be reason for the Swedish Police as a whole to discuss the extent to which emergency phones may be an alternative for a larger proportion of those

who have applied for a restraining order but been turned down. In view of past experience, the number of actual uses of an emergency phone in an acute situation would probably not increase very much. The additional cost of this more extensive praxis would then mainly involve the cost of the emergency phones themselves.

### **Follow-up systems need to be developed**

In its guidance on technical protection, the National Police Board emphasises the importance of following up the initiative. The National Council shares this assessment. Against this background, it is unsatisfactory that half of the police authorities are today not following up the initiative and also that there are no uniform procedures for how this follow-up should be carried out.