



**Indicators of trends in  
sexual offences  
2005–2017**

# Indicators of trends in sexual offences 2005–2017

Summary of report 2019:5

**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. We do this by providing factual information and disseminating knowledge on crime, law enforcement, and crime prevention work, first and foremost to the Government and law enforcement agencies.

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# Summary

## The National Council's mandate

The number of sexual offences reported to the police has increased steadily over the past few decades. In recent years, there has also been an increase in self-reported exposure to sexual offences according to the Swedish Crime Survey (SCS).

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) was therefore instructed by the Government to examine the reasons for the increases witnessed since 2005. On the basis of data on both self-reported exposure to crime and offences reported to the police, Brå has also been instructed to examine whether the increases relate to specific types of sexual offences, modus operandi, situations or victims and also, to the extent that it is possible, to examine the group of perpetrators. Brå has also been asked to estimate, as far as possible, the actual trend in sexual offences and how the trend in self-reported exposure may be related to both offences reported to the police and actual crime trends.

## Method

Brå has analysed the trend in sexual offences reported to the police during the period 2005–2017, focusing on the two most numerous types of police-reported sexual offences, sexual molestation and rape. In order to facilitate comparisons with the trend based on the SCS, which does not include persons under 16 years of age, the analyses have been limited to offences against persons aged 15 or over.

The trend in self-reported exposure to sexual offences, as measured by the SCS, has also been analysed. Prior to the 2018 wave of the SCS, which posed questions regarding exposure to crime in 2017, the survey's data collection methodology was revised. Among other things, the text which introduces the question on sexual offences in the SCS was adjusted. This change, in combination with other, more extensive changes in the survey methodology, means that it is not possible to compare the data from the old and the revised methods of generating results. The analyses of the SCS data have therefore been limited to the period 2005–2016.

In order to obtain an overview of the types of sexual offences that have been reported in the SCS, telephone interviews have been conducted with persons who, according to the SCS, stated that they had been exposed to sexual offences in 2016. Persons who did not wish to participate in a telephone interview were given the opportunity to provide an account by letter. A total of 50 of these accounts have formed the basis for a qualitative analysis. These accounts were also used in an analysis of the seriousness of the sexual offences reported in the SCS. In this analysis, a search was made in the injured party register maintained by the police for those persons who had reported exposure to sexual offences in the SCS, in order to study what types of sexual offences these individuals had reported to the police.

Brå has also carried out analyses of trends based on other indicators of sexual offences, and of indicators relating to external factors that may be of value when discussing whether the trends in sexual offences reported to the police and in victim surveys may represent a real increase or rather be a result of an increase in reporting propensities. The indicators examined involve participation in public entertainments, Internet use, demographic changes and an increased societal awareness regarding sexual offences.

### **Research is improving our knowledge - but important questions are and will remain difficult to answer**

The questions examined in this study are as difficult to answer fully as they are important. It is well established that a large proportion of all offences against the person, and particularly sexual offences, do not come to the attention of public authorities or investigatory bodies. There are no comprehensive data on either the number of offences actually committed or on how many of these offences are registered by authorities or noted in surveys. Given these factors, analysing and interpreting trends in sexual offences as they appear in the available sources constitutes a challenge, and it is even more difficult to establish the actual extent and nature of sex crime, and of trends in sexual offences over time. There are therefore (and will always be) many unanswered questions with regard to sexual offences and their development. In this regard, it should also be noted that several of the changes observed in the indicators of sexual offences relate primarily to the most recent years, and that it is particularly difficult to draw conclusions on the basis of such a short-term perspective.

The final sentence of the government's instruction to Brå stated that the agency should examine the trends in sexual offences in relation to several different factors but, with respect to perpetrators, subject to the clarification that this was to be done to the extent that it was possible. In its work with the instruction, Brå has conducted several important analyses of a type that have been possible given the specified time frame and available resources. One factor that it has not been possible to study

in depth involves the perpetrators of sexual offences. In the current context, it has not been possible to study more than the general significance of demographic changes including, for example, those related to increased immigration and the reception of large numbers of refugees. In the future, the agency will continue to present various forms of statistics and analyses on sexual offences and trends in sex crime, and other research environments will contribute with additional results. The research improves the available knowledge and provides data that can be used as a basis for debate, discussion and decision-making. At the same time, however, many important questions are still difficult to answer and some questions will continue to remain unanswered.

## Sexual offences reported to the police

Sexual offences reported to the police consist almost exclusively of offences against women. According to the statistics on reported offences, the proportion of male victims of rape has increased slightly in recent years, but in 2017 the victim was a woman in 95 per cent of reported rapes and over 90 per cent of reported cases of sexual molestation. For both types of offences, the perpetrator was a man in the vast majority of cases.

### **Trend in rapes reported to the police**

Police-reported rapes against persons aged 15 or over increased between 2005 and 2008. This increase was followed by a longer period during which reported rapes remained at a relatively stable level, prior to a new increase in 2016 and 2017.

Between 2005 and 2009, there was an increase in the proportion of police reports relating to rapes that had taken place more than six months prior to the date on which the offence was reported. This proportion then remained stable during the period 2010–2017, at approximately one-quarter of the rapes reported to the police.

Brå has conducted a detailed analysis of a sample of reported rapes from 2005, 2011 and 2017. The analysis shows an increase in the reporting of both serious rapes (which included physical violence) and other rapes between 2005 and 2011. From 2011, there was no further increase in the reporting of rapes that involved physical violence or where the injured party had suffered physical injury as a result of the assault. The increase in reported rapes between 2011 and 2017 involved offences in which no violence was perpetrated and which had been committed by persons who were known to the injured party, primarily friends and acquaintances. There was no increase between 2011 and 2017 in reported rapes committed by previously unknown perpetrators, or in so-called blitz rapes. The analyses also show that most rapes reported to the police involve

offences against women that were committed indoors, primarily rapes in private residences. It is also this type of crime that has increased most in the statistics on reported offences during the years studied. Reported rapes involving alcohol or narcotics, or where the complainant was in a defenceless condition at the time of the offence, increased both between 2005 and 2011 and between 2011 and 2017. Between 2011 and 2017, an increase is also apparent in rapes by perpetrators with whom the injured party had previously only been in contact via the Internet, primarily via some form of dating app. This probably reflects a change towards new forms of dating behaviour.

## **The trend in sexual molestation offences reported to the police**

Sexual molestation includes both verbal and physical sexual violations, as well as communications in the form of offensive photographs or film clips. The offences may occur both during physical meetings and via telephone and the Internet.

Police-reported cases of sexual molestation against individuals aged 15 or over increased between 2005 and 2009. Several years of stability followed, with a new increase towards the end of the studied period, particularly during the years 2016 and 2017. Approximately 9 out of 10 police reports on sexual molestation were registered in close chronological proximity to the crime, and this has not changed over time.

A more detailed analysis of a sample of police reports from 2005, 2011 and 2017 demonstrates that there has been an increase in police reports relating to sexual molestation by both known and unknown perpetrators. However, in the majority of the reported sexual molestation cases, the perpetrator was someone already known to the injured party.

Police reports which included verbal sexual molestation, i.e. where the perpetrator had said or written something sexually offensive to the injured party, increased between 2005 and 2017. During this period, reports to the police regarding physical sexual molestation also increased, but with a particularly notable increase between 2011 and 2017. Almost one-third of the increase between these years involved cases of sexual molestation in which the perpetrator touched the injured party's genitals or breasts. At the same time, most of the increase involved an unwanted sexual touching not of the genitals or breasts, but of some other part of the injured party's body, most often the buttocks.

Police reports of sexual molestation via the Internet increased relatively significantly between 2011 and 2017. This increase primarily involved offences that had taken place via social media and apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. A significant proportion of the increase related to cases in which the perpetrators had sent pictures or film clips of their genitals or other pornographic material. Reports of sexual molestation via

telephone calls, text messages, or email decreased by approximately one-third during the same period.

As regards the location of the offences, the analysis found no major changes between 2005 and 2011. However, between 2011 and 2017, there was a relatively substantial increase in reports of sexual molestation in the context of public entertainments. In 2017, almost one-third of these reports related to offences committed at festivals, a crime location which was very rarely noted in the police reports from 2005 and 2011.

## Self-reported exposure to sexual offences

The trend in self-reported exposure to sexual offences as registered by the Swedish Crime Survey (SCS) differs from the trend in offences reported to the police. During the years 2005–2012, the proportion of the population who reported exposure to sexual offences in the SCS remained relatively stable (between 0.7 and 0.9 per cent of the population). After this, the level of self-reported exposure to sexual offences increased, with a particularly steep increase being noted in the SCS in 2015 and 2016. In 2016, 2.4 per cent of the population reported having been exposed to sexual offences in the SCS.

The increase noted in the SCS primarily relates to self-reported exposure to sexual offences among women, although the proportion of men reporting exposure to sexual offences also increased towards the end of the period examined. In 2016, 4.1 per cent of the women and 0.6 per cent of the men who participated in the SCS stated that they had been exposed to a sexual offence.

A clear majority, just over 9 out of 10, of the perpetrators in the sexual offence incidents reported in the SCS are men, and this proportion has not changed during the period examined.

## **A qualitative analysis shows that the SCS captures a wide range of sexual offences**

The qualitative analysis of accounts from individuals who had participated in the SCS and reported having been exposed to a sexual offence in 2016 shows that the survey captures everything from sexually offensive remarks to rapes involving both physical and psychological violence. Many of the accounts related to unwanted sexual touching by unknown persons, often in clubs or bars, but also at festivals and on public transport. In the accounts that involved the interviewees having been subject to sexual intercourse against their will, the perpetrator was often a partner or boyfriend, or a friend or acquaintance.



## **An increase in reported exposure in large segments of the population**

The analysis of the trend in sexual offences as reported in the SCS shows that the increase is not limited to a particular segment of the population. There has been a clear increase in self-reported exposure to sexual offences amongst persons from all population groups, with the exception of persons between the ages of 65 and 79. The increase has been greatest amongst women and persons between the ages of 16 and 24.

The increase has essentially been equally substantial in large cities, smaller towns, and rural areas. In addition, the increased reporting involves both offences that took place in Sweden and offences that were committed abroad.

According to the SCS, the perpetrator was somewhat more often a person who was previously unknown to the victim at the end of the period examined, but the increase in reported exposure to sexual victimisation also applies to offences committed by partners and boyfriends/girlfriends, and also persons known to the victim in some other way. At the end of the period, a somewhat larger proportion of the perpetrators were aged between 18 and 34.

The increase noted in the SCS also relates to all the types of crime locations included in the survey. At the end of the period, a smaller proportion of the reported offences had taken place in someone's home, whereas the proportion that had taken place at work and in schools remained unchanged. The greatest increase was noted in relation to incidents that had occurred in public places, with the clearest increase involving offences committed at places of public entertainment.

## **The increase in reported exposure relates primarily to less serious sexual offences**

The SCS presents indicators for both all sexual offences and serious sexual offences. When the increase in self-reported exposure to sexual offences began in 2013, the reporting of serious sexual offences also increased. However, there was then no further increase during the years up until 2016. Based on this indicator, the proportion of the population reporting exposure to serious sexual offences was thus approximately the same in 2016 as in 2013.

A more detailed study has been conducted in order to examine the seriousness of the sexual offences described by the participants in the SCS. This study concludes that most of the persons who, according to the SCS, had been exposed to a serious sexual offence stated that they had been subject to violence, restraint, or threats, but many of them did not perceive the incident as a rape. An examination of the cases reported in the SCS that involved violence or threats shows that these often related to less serious sexual offences than rape.

The analysis shows that the substantial increase in the level of self-reported exposure to sexual offences registered by the SCS at the end of the period examined primarily relates to less serious sexual offences, which did not involve the use of any form of threat, restraint, or violence. The incidents which are referred to in this study as the *most serious offences* in the SCS data have not increased to the same extent and lie at a much lower level.

During the period after 2011, *the most serious sexual offences* according to the SCS remained relatively stable, although a certain increase can be noted for individual years. The incidents that have increased most according to the SCS are largely similar to those included in the legal definition of sexual molestation.

### **Different trends in the SCS and the statistics on reported crime at the beginning of the period examined**

The number of sexual offences reported to the police increased during the years 2005–2009, while self-reported exposure to sexual offences in the SCS remained stable. It is reasonable to interpret this as indicating that the propensity to report sexual offences to the police increased during this period. One result which indicates an increased reporting propensity is that there was an increase during these years in police reports of rapes that had taken place a relatively long time prior to being reported. It is also likely that the expanded legal definition of rape (resulting from legislation that came into force in 2005) contributed to the increase in rapes reported to the police during this period.

### **Consistent picture of the most serious sexual offences, 2011–2017**

The statistics on both offences reported to the police and in the SCS show a relatively stable level for the most serious sexual offences during most of the period between 2011 and 2017.

There is no increase in rapes reported to the police involving physical violence, and the *most serious sexual offences* reported in the SCS remained at a relatively stable level, even though a certain increase can be noted for specific years.

### **Sexual molestation: increasing trend but differences in the size of the increase between the SCS and crimes reported to the police show**

According to both the SCS and the reported crime statistics, reports of sexual molestation increased more markedly than reports of more serious sexual offences during the period after 2011. The increase is much more marked in the SCS data however. Among offences reported to the police,

physical sexual molestation accounts for a large part of the increase noted between 2011 and 2017. The relatively more serious offences, i.e. sexual touching of the injured party's genitals or breasts, increased during these years but most of the increase related to touching of other parts of the body. According to both the SCS and police reports, there is a clear increase in the reporting of offences committed at places of public entertainment.

## Trends according to other indicators

The report presents three other indicators of trends in sexual offences for the period 2005–2016: statistics on the number of persons who sought medical attention as a consequence of sexual assault, and two surveys that include a question on exposure to sexual molestation.

As has been described above, the analysis of the seriousness of the crimes reported in the SCS showed no substantial increase in the most serious sexual offences, i.e. those corresponding to rape and sexual coercion. This finding is also supported by the trend in the number of persons who sought hospital treatment as a result of sexual assault. This number has varied somewhat from year to year but during the years until 2016 there was no clear increase in the number of persons in the population who had been exposed to serious sexual offences that had led them to seek hospital treatment. The healthcare statistics do, however, show an increase in 2017.

## Trends in external factors

### **Changes in the opportunity structure for sex crime**

Overarching analyses have been conducted of the trends in indicators of participation in public entertainments and access to the Internet in order to ascertain whether these might explain the increases found in the statistics on sex offences reported to the police or in the SCS. One reasonable conclusion from these analyses is that the rapid increase in the use of smartphones, which has primarily occurred during the period after 2011, may have contributed to an increase in certain types of sexual offences. The trend in the number of permanent licenses to serve alcohol indicates a steady increase in the number of places of public entertainment after 2008, with a stabilisation in the most recent years. It is therefore difficult to identify any correlation between the trend in the number of public entertainment establishments and the trends in sexual offences as reflected in offences reported to the police or in the SCS. The number of establishments with a permanent liquor license increased during the period when the numbers of sexual offences reported to the police in the SCS were relatively stable. The number of permanent liquor licenses was more stable during the years 2015–2016, when there was a significant increase in sexual molestation according to the SCS, and when the number of sexual offences reported to the police also increased.

## Demographic changes

Brå's instruction also included providing a picture of the group of perpetrators, to the extent that this was possible on the basis of the data sources included in the Government's instruction. It has not been possible to shed more light on this group on the basis of either the review of police reports or the analysis of the information contained in the SCS. This is the case due to the fact that the instruction focuses on data on self-reported exposure to crime, which only include information regarding the perpetrator's gender, age and relationship to the victim, and data on offences reported to the police, which include a large number of offences for which no suspect has been identified.

Brå has carried out tentative analyses of demographic changes among groups in the population that are known to be at excess risk for registered criminality, such as men, young people, and foreign-born individuals who have migrated to Sweden. These analyses show that the proportion of the population comprised of certain of these groups has increased gradually over the course of the period examined. However, this gradual increase is not reflected in the trends followed by sexual offences reported to the police and in the SCS, which are subject to substantial variations over time, and which increase substantially at the end of the period examined. This indicates that these demographic changes cannot constitute a central explanation for the long-term trend in sexual offences reported to the police or in the SCS since 2005.

However, one demographic change that does coincide with the steep increase in minor sexual offences noted in the SCS in 2015–2016 is the extensive influx of refugees in 2015. Since there has been a substantial public debate on possible links between the flow of refugees in 2015 and the increase in sexual offences reported to the police and in the SCS, Brå has conducted a number of analyses in an attempt to answer the question. These analyses should be viewed as tentative, and they are necessarily in part based on uncertain estimates. Having said this, the analyses do not indicate that the flow of refugees in 2015 could account for anything more than a small part of the increase in offences reported in the SCS in 2016.

## Factors which could affect reporting rates to the police and in the SCS

### *Rates of reporting to the police*

Three major revisions of the sex crime legislation have been implemented during the period 2005–2017, a development which reflects an ongoing decline in societal tolerance for sexual assault. During the period after 2010, this legislative work has also been reflected in a recurrent focus in the public debate on the issue of the implementation of consent-based sex crime legislation. There have also been a number of high-profile media and

social-media campaigns against sexual offences since 2010. These campaigns share a number of common features, having sent clear signals that sexual offences should not be tolerated, that the blame must be placed on the perpetrator and not on the victim, and that victims must be given the courage to talk about and report exposure to sexual offences.

The dark figure of sex crime, i.e. the cases that are not reported to the police, is greatest for the less serious offences, which are also the most common. It is for these offences that changes in society's view of sex crime have the greatest potential to produce increased reporting, by helping people understand that what they have been exposed to is in fact a crime, and by producing a climate in which they feel safe in filing a report with the police.

An analysis of the monthly statistics on reported sexual molestation offences supports the conclusion that the attention generated by two media campaigns, in one case in combination with the police making it easier for crime victims to report offences, contributed significantly to the increases noted in the number of police-reported sexual molestation offences in the years 2013 and 2016.

### ***Rates of reporting in the SCS***

In light of the increasing attention focused on sexual offences and the various media campaigns described above, it would not be unreasonable to expect individuals who have been exposed to sexual offences to have spent more time reflecting over and re-evaluating their experiences of sexual violations. The increasing attention may also have contributed to a reduction in feelings of guilt and shame, and a greater willingness to talk about these experiences, not only in general but also in questionnaire surveys. It is thus reasonable to assume that this has resulted in an increasing propensity to report such incidents in the SCS.

One might then ask why the number of offences reported to police did not increase as quickly or to the same extent. One conceivable explanation is that the "costs" associated with reporting a sexual offence to the police, particularly if the offender is someone well-known to the victim, are much higher than those associated with reporting such offences in an anonymous telephone survey.

## **The National Council's assessment**

Brå's instruction from the Government included estimating, to the extent possible, the trend in the number of sexual offences actually committed in society and how the trend in self-reported exposure to sex crime relates to the trends in offences reported to the police and in actual levels of sex crime. The SCS is the most relevant source with regard to levels of self-reported exposure to sex crime, while statistics on reported offences reflect the number of sex crimes reported to the police. It should be emphasised

that it is not possible to provide a definitive answer to how the trends in these two indicators should be interpreted. There are no alternative, more reliable, sources to rely on. Brå has primarily concentrated on conducting an in-depth analysis of police reports and of the information contained in the SCS. The objective has been to ascertain whether there have been changes in the nature of the offences captured by these two sources, which might provide a basis for assessing whether the trends are primarily the result of actual changes in the number of sexual offences committed in society or whether they are primarily a result of an increased reporting rate and increased motivation to report particularly less serious sexual offences in the SCS. Brå has also compared the results from the SCS with those from other, similar, surveys and has examined whether there are “external” societal factors that have changed in a way which might explain the trends in sexual offences noted in the statistics on offences reported to the police and in the SCS.

Based on this material, Brå has made as well-grounded an assessment as possible. However, any such assessment is inevitably subject to a degree of uncertainty.

### **An overall assessment of the trend**

On the whole, it can be concluded that the number of *rapes* reported to the police has followed an increasing trend since 2005, with a more substantial increase at the beginning and end of the period, but with a period of relative stability between these two points. The increase at the beginning of the period is likely to have been largely due to the expanded legal definition of rape that was introduced into the penal code 2005. The number of persons who have reported exposure to more serious sexual offences, corresponding to rape and sexual coercion, in the SCS has also increased during the period examined, but this increase has been relatively small. The analysis conducted by Brå also shows that the number of women who have reported incidents corresponding to rape or sexual coercion in the SCS is smaller than previously published estimates have suggested. In Brå’s assessment, the external factors that have been studied indicate that the increasing trends in both police and survey data at the end of the period are primarily the result of a combination of societal changes in the ways people communicate and socialise with one another and an increased reporting rate.

As regards *sexual molestation* offences reported to the police and in the SCS, both sources show a significant increase. A survey conducted by City of Stockholm also shows an increase. The increase is particularly steep in the SCS in the final years of the period examined. In Brå’s judgement, the long-term trend since 2005 is probably explained by external factors, similar to those that have affected the trend in recorded rape offences. In respect of the rapid increase noted specifically in the SCS during the most

recent years, Brå's analyses indicate that these are to a significant extent the result of an increased propensity among women to speak openly about exposure to sexual molestation, with this change being likely to have a particularly substantial effect on questionnaire surveys such as the SCS. As was noted above, "speaking openly" in the form of filing a police report is likely to entail a significantly higher "cost" than reporting exposure to sexual molestation anonymously in the SCS. However, it is not possible to say precisely how much of the increase in police-reported crime and self-reported exposure to sex offences is due to an increased rate of reporting to the police and in the SCS, and how much may be due to an actual increase.

It is possible that the picture may become clearer if the increases noted over the most recent years can be followed up over a somewhat longer period of time. There is thus good reason to carefully follow future trends in offences reported to the police and in the SCS, as well as trends in external societal factors that might produce changes in the opportunity structure for sexual offences.

*Has the nature of the sexual offences reported to the police changed over time? And has the character of self-reported exposure to sexual offences changed? What types of sexual offences are captured by the Swedish Crime Survey (SCS)? What factors indicate that increases noted in sexual offences reported to the police and in the SCS might reflect an actual increase or rather increases in the respective reporting rates?*

These questions constitute the point of departure for this report, which describes changes over time in the nature of both sex crimes reported to the police and self-reported exposure to sexual offences. The report also analyses the seriousness of sexual offences reported in the SCS, as well as factors that might have affected the trends in both actual levels of sex crime and the propensity of victims to report sexual offences to the police or in the SCS.

The report has been written in response to an instruction from the Swedish Government to investigate the trends in sexual offences reported to the police, and in self-reported exposure to sexual offences, during the period 2005–2017.