



Lethal violence in Sweden 1990 – 2014

*A description of trends with a
specific focus on firearm violence*

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English summary of Brå report 2015:24

**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.

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Summary

Lethal violence is a central type of offence in studies of crime trends in Sweden and in other countries. The rate of unreported cases, i.e. events which never come to the police's attention, is believed to be low for such offences and there is relatively consistent data over time. This report analyses all cases of completed murder, manslaughter, and assault with a lethal outcome of which the police were aware from 1990–2014. The purpose is to describe lethal violence in Sweden, both with a focus on the general trends and with a specific focus on lethal violence with firearms. The latter type of lethal violence has been given a great deal of attention during recent years, not the least in connection with reports of shootings in major cities while, at the same time, there has not yet been a detailed analysis of lethal firearm violence. In addition to information from the criminal justice system regarding cases of lethal violence (police investigations, sentences, etc.), the report also uses data from the National Board of Health and Welfare's cause of death register and patient register.

General reduction in lethal violence in both the 1990s and the 2000s

Lethal violence has declined in Sweden, as well as in a number of other Western countries, during the past two decades. This positive trend began during the first half of the 1990s, continued into the 2000s and has, in any event, remained stable during the first years of the 2010s. Accordingly, in relation to population growth, the number of victims of lethal violence declined by almost one-third from the beginning of the 1990s until the beginning of the 2010s. In absolute figures, an average of 80 persons per year were victims of lethal violence from 2010-2014, as compared with 95 persons from 2000-2004 and an average of 107 persons from 1990-1994. On average, one-third of the victims were women and two-thirds were men, both in the 2000s and the 1990s.

Alcohol-related violence represents a significant percentage of the reduction

The greatest decline has been in spontaneous, alcohol-related cases of lethal violence between men. This type of lethal violence, which is characteristically expressive violence (for reasons such as perceived insults or jealousy) and which often takes place in private residences with knives or blunt objects, has long dominated – and still dominates – lethal violence in Sweden and other nearby countries. A reduction in this type of lethal violence thus entails a reduction in the total levels of lethal violence in Sweden, particularly

in counties outside of the major metropolitan regions, where the change has had the largest breakthrough effect in the 2000s.

Lethal violence against women in intimate relationships has also declined since the middle of the 2000s, from a previous average of 17 victims per year to an average of 13 victims per year from 2008–2013. Moreover, lethal violence arising from hate crime and lethal violence against children have declined in a longer-term perspective.

The reduction in lethal violence in Sweden appears to be related, in part, to changes in alcohol consumption. Studies indicate a reduction in binge drinking among young people and fewer alcohol-related deaths in general. These changes come at the same time – and to a certain extent in the same regions – as the reduction in lethal violence, which in turn also primarily applies to the contexts in which alcohol is highly significant. However, it is reasonable to believe that there are other possible explanations. The trend needs to be followed and analysed more closely, not the least in respect of lethal violence against women in intimate relationships, in order to see the extent of the effect of circumstances such as a generally reduced acceptance for violence or focused efforts on behalf of women exposed to violence.

Increase in certain types of firearm-related violence in large cities ...

Taken as a whole, lethal violence specifically with firearms has neither increased nor decreased since the 1990s. There was an average of slightly fewer than 20 victims per year of such violence in the beginning of the 1990s as well as in the beginning of the 2000s and the beginning of the 2010s. There has, however, been a clear structural change in this lethal violence. In major metropolitan counties, there has been a continuous increase in the number and percentage of cases which occurred in the context of criminal conflicts where illegal handguns (pistols, revolvers) were used. At the same time, there has been a tangible decrease in the number and percentage of cases which take place in contexts other than criminal conflicts (for example, partner violence) outside of major metropolitan counties and with legal hunting weapons and other two-handed weapons. This trend means that criminal conflicts in major metropolitan counties came to represent almost half of all cases of lethal violence with firearms in Sweden in the beginning of the 2010s, as compared with just under 20 per cent in the beginning of the 1990s, and that the number of men among all victims has increased while the number of women has decreased. The use of lethal firearm violence in the context of criminal conflicts has increased most in the counties of Skåne and Västra Götaland, while the level of such cases has more or less remain unchanged in Stockholm County when seen over the long-term. This difference means that Skåne and Västra Götaland are the only counties where lethal violence with firearms has increased overall in relation to population growth in the 1990s and 2000s.

The victims are often young men from socially vulnerable areas – and clearances of offences are low

The victims of lethal violence with illegal firearms (primarily in criminal conflicts) which have increased are often young adult men who have them-

selves previously been convicted of an offence (not infrequently with a prison sentence) and, to a great extent, are unemployed or otherwise outside of the labour market. One can see a high percentage of unemployed persons among the victims of other types of lethal violence as well, but the percentage is particularly high in respect of victims of lethal firearm violence in the 2000s. A considerably high percentage of lethal firearm violence also took place in the most socially vulnerable areas of the major metropolitan counties (URBAN areas), where the residents' socioeconomic resources are significantly less than those of the population on average. Police clearances of offences are relatively low, due in part (among other things) to the fact that offences often take place outdoors in public places and without physical contact between the victim and the perpetrator.

A successive increase in the presence of illegal handguns in Sweden may be one possible explanation for the increase in lethal firearm violence in the context of criminal conflicts in major metropolitan counties. An increased presence of illegal weapons may, in turn, be rooted in the increase of certain types of organised criminality, for example, extortion, illegal collections, and narcotics sales; moreover the fall of the Eastern Bloc and the war in the Balkans in the 1990s gave rise to new possibilities for the illegal import of weapons. Accordingly, for the purposes of prevention, it is appropriate to work within the criminal justice system to tap into, disrupt, and prevent offences and trafficking in illegal firearms in Sweden. However, it is also important to look for explanations for the trend other than the presence of weapons and, thereupon, additional possibilities for preventive work. Examples of such important problem areas include local organised criminality and a high concentration of unemployment in a certain particularly vulnerable major metropolitan areas.

... but a clear decrease in lethal firearm violence with legal weapons

At the same time, it is also important to shed light on the types of lethal violence with firearms which decreased tangibly in Sweden during the 1990s and 2000s. This involves, above all, lethal violence with legal hunting weapons and other two-handed weapons which takes place within the scope of family and partner violence or other conflicts outside of the criminal milieu, and which occurs in counties outside of the major metropolitan regions as often as in the major metropolitan counties. Taken as a whole, this type of lethal firearm violence has declined by almost half since the middle of the 1990s. The trend can, in part, be related to a total overall decline in legal weapon ownership in Sweden, where the number of persons with gun licences decreased from almost 9 per cent of the population to slightly more than 6 per cent of the population from the middle of the 1990s to the beginning of the 2010s. Reasonably speaking, there are also other – and perhaps more important – explanations, for example, more stringent provisions regarding recall of weapons. The reduction in lethal violence using legal firearms probably also relates, to a certain extent, with the general reduction in lethal violence in respect of alcohol-related cases and violence within families or intimate relationships. Specifically, the analyses show that it is often in these contexts that legal weapons are used for lethal violence.

Lethal firearm violence in criminal conflicts still represents only one-tenth of all lethal violence

It is also important to point out that lethal firearm violence which takes place in the context of criminal conflicts in large cities still constitutes a limited percentage of all lethal violence. In absolute numbers, such cases increased from approximately 3 or 4 per year during the 1990s to approximately 8 per year in the beginning of the 2010s. In other words, 9 out of 10 cases of lethal violence in Sweden take place in other contexts. It is also not obvious that in terms of its underlying mechanisms, there is an actual difference between the “new” lethal firearm violence in the major metropolitan regions and the spontaneous, alcohol-fuelled conflicts with a lethal outcome using knives and bodily force which were more prevalent in previous decades than today. The difference is that the “new” type of offence entails a lower incidence of the element of alcohol consumption, violence takes place with a firearm instead of a knife, and the persons involved have an even weaker connection than previously to the legal labour and housing markets.



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