



Youth robberies

A review of the current situation and development

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

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English summary of Brå report 2021:19

Summary

This report shows that the number of reported robberies against people under 18 as well as the self-reported exposure to robbery among young people have both increased in recent years. In 2020, the number of reported youth robberies fell slightly, most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this fall was only seen in cities and municipalities close to cities. Throughout the rest of Sweden, the number of reported robberies continued to rise. The report also shows that increasingly more youths express worry about being robbed, and this increase is particularly noticeable among boys.

Street robbery is a serious crime, and the trends we are seeing give cause for concern. Exactly how youth robberies are committed varies greatly. In some cases, no explicit threats or violence are used, while in other cases, explicit threats, violence and weapons, as well as acts of force and humiliation, are used. As a consequence, many youths who fall victim to robbery are affected by the crime not only financially, but also psychologically and physically. The report shows, for instance, that after being robbed, youths may have trouble sleeping, not want to go out or be in certain places and perhaps even need medical care.

There is a need to closely watch developments in street robbery among young people, and this study offers an updated picture of these developments and the geographic distribution. The report also describes the victims, suspects and nature of youth robbery, as well as young people's experiences of robbery. There is much research in the area, and Brå regularly reviews developments in street robbery. However, a little more than 20 years have passed since Brå conducted a study focused on youth robbery, and that study concerned youths robbing other youths in the cities of Malmö and Stockholm.

This study is based on data from Brå's crime statistics, official registry data and geographic data from the Swedish Police Authority and Statistics Sweden, as well as surveys on exposure to and participation in street robbery targeting youths. The study also includes a review of preliminary investigations into youth robbery and interviews with young perpetrators, victims and parents of victims.

Reported youth robberies have increased throughout Sweden

From 2008 onwards, robberies against persons under 18 are recorded separately in Sweden's crime statistics. In 2008, 1,541 robberies against persons under 18 were reported, corresponding to 80 robberies per 100,000

inhabitants under 18. The number of reported robberies against persons under 18 fell between 2009 and 2013, after which the numbers remained relatively stable until 2016. Following this, the number of reported robberies increased dramatically. In 2019, 2,489 such robberies were reported, corresponding to 114 robberies per 100,000 inhabitants under 18. In 2020, the number of reported robberies against persons under 18 fell to 2,186, corresponding to 100 robberies per 100,000 inhabitants under 18.

In recent years, the increase in youth robberies has been particularly noticeable in cities and municipalities close to cities, where the number of reported robberies against persons under 18 has risen from 86 robberies per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016 to 186 robberies per 100,000 inhabitants in 2019. By contrast, the relative increase since 2008 has been greatest in smaller towns/urban areas and rural municipalities, where the number of reported youth robberies per 100,000 inhabitants was twice as high in 2019 compared to 2008.

Self-reported exposure to robbery has also increased

The self-reporting studies regularly conducted by Brå also show that street robbery among young people has increased in recent years. In the national Swedish Crime Survey, 3.3 percent of youths aged 16–19 stated that they had been robbed in 2019, to be compared with 1.5 percent in 2016. In the School Survey on Crime, 2.8 percent of pupils in year 9 stated that they had been robbed in 2019, as compared to 2.4 percent in 2015. The Stockholm survey also shows an increase in self-reported exposure to robbery among youths.

The recent relatively dramatic increases in both the number of reported robberies of persons under 18 and the self-reported exposure of youths to robbery suggest that these figures generally reflect an actual increase in youth robberies and not a change in the propensity to report.

The self-reporting studies show that the increase in exposure to robbery is mainly seen among boys. The demographic of young people reporting that they have been robbed has also changed. In the school survey, the percentage of pupils exposed to robbery has increased among those whose parents both have a university education, whose parents are both employed and whose families do not face financial insecurity. Parallel to this, the percentage exposed to robbery has decreased among pupils with at least one parent without a university education, with at least one parent out of work and with families facing financial insecurity. However, the percentage of pupils reporting that they have been robbed remains highest among those from families facing financial insecurity.

Both the school survey and the national survey show an increase since 2015/2016 in the percentage of young people with a Swedish background stating that they have been robbed during the past year. For young people with a non-Swedish background, the percentage varies more between years, making it difficult to discern any trend.

In terms of total exposure among those with Swedish and non-Swedish backgrounds, respectively, the results of the two surveys differ. In the school survey, the percentage of pupils with a non-Swedish background who reported being robbed remains higher than for students with a Swedish background, although the difference has decreased. In the national survey, the relationship is the opposite. Since 2018, the percentage of youths with a Swedish background stating that they have been robbed is higher than among youths with a non-Swedish background.

Young people are more worried about being robbed

According to the national survey, an increasing percentage of young people are worried about being robbed. In 2021, 18 percent of those aged 16–19 stated that they were very or quite often worried about being robbed. In 2017, 14 percent stated that they were worried about being robbed.

A slightly higher percentage of girls state that they are very or quite often worried about being robbed, as compared to boys (19 percent and 16 percent, respectively, in 2021). Similarly, a higher percentage of young people with a Swedish background are often worried about being robbed, as compared to young people with a non-Swedish background (19 percent and 15 percent, respectively, in 2021).

One in five declines to participate in a preliminary investigation

In one in five preliminary investigations, the victim either declines to take part or later withdraws their participation. In other words, a report has been made in these cases, but at some point during the investigation, the victim chooses not to take part. Just over half of these victims have expressed fear after being subjected to the crime.

Previous studies show that many youths do not report being robbed, although the propensity to report increases if violence is used during the robbery.

Most robberies in cities and municipalities near cities

Most youth robberies are committed in cities and municipalities close to cities. After the metropolitan municipalities of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, the municipalities with the most youth robberies throughout the

entire period 2015–2019 are Helsingborg, Västerås, Haninge, Uppsala, Huddinge, Örebro, Nacka, Solna and Eskilstuna. If the municipal population is considered instead, Solna is the municipality with the highest number of youth robberies per 100,000 inhabitants under the age of 18 during the same period. In addition to the municipalities listed above, Sundbyberg, Salem, Upplands-Bro, Landskrona and Järfälla also had relatively high numbers of youth robberies in relation to their populations throughout the period. Youth robberies are usually committed after school between 3 pm and 10 pm and in areas with larger shopping centres or malls or at public transport hubs. Other areas that see many youth robberies include schools and sports centres. Common to all these areas where youth robberies are particularly frequent is that many youths, as well as many other people, gather there or pass through them. Many of the robberies take place in public with other people nearby. In the case of robberies on school grounds or close to schools, the robberies are often committed in the evening when young people gather there or pass through the area in their free time.

Majority of suspected perpetrators boys

The majority of suspects in youth robberies are boys. The percentage of suspected girls has, however, increased during the period 2015–2019, from 4 percent to 8 percent. The number of suspected youths has increased since 2016 across all age groups, although the largest increase has been seen among those aged 15 and 16. Two thirds of the suspects in 2015–2019 have a non-Swedish background. The situation is reversed among the victims, with about three quarters (77 percent) having a Swedish background.

The results also show that almost one in four suspects has been suspected of more than one youth robbery during the period 2015–2019. Moreover, about half of all youth robberies (where there is a suspect) are committed by someone who has been suspected of robbery more than once.

Compared to youth robbery victims, youth robbery suspects are more likely to live in areas of low socioeconomic status. In such neighbourhoods, the percentage of people with a non-Swedish background is generally higher than in the area where the victim lives. Similarly, the percentages of people living in rented accommodation and with low economic standards of living are higher. Furthermore, the percentages of people in employment and with a higher education are lower. The areas with the very highest numbers of suspects in relation to the population are found in Gothenburg (Hjällbo/Eriksbo), Malmö (Sorgenfri) and Södertälje (Fornhöjden).

Young people robbed of mobile phones, clothing and headphones

The targeted youth often lose a number of their possessions when robbed. The most commonly stolen items are mobile phones, clothing, cash and headphones. However, some change was seen between 2015 and 2019. In 2015, mobile phones, clothing and cash were the most common items (in that order). In 2019, however, wireless headphones were more commonly stolen than cash, and young people lost expensive designer clothing as often as their mobile phones. As for clothing, jackets are the most commonly stolen items, although hats, belts and tops are also taken. The goods stolen during youth robberies are sometimes resold on established online trading sites, via social media or to stores.

Boys rob other boys

When all the suspects in a robbery are boys, it is generally other boys who have been robbed. A typical robbery involves two or three boys robbing a solitary boy. In two thirds of cases, the suspects and the victims are completely unknown to each other, that is, there is rarely any previous relationship between those involved.

The most common approach among suspected boys is direct confrontation. This means that the victims are confronted and relatively immediately told to hand over their mobile phones, headphones or other possessions. Another common approach involves diversion, whereby the suspects initiate a conversation and then lure the victim away to a place where the robbery is committed.

Explicit threats are seen in two thirds of the preliminary investigations, and these are usually threats of violence or death. When all the robbery suspects are boys, some form of violence is seen in about three out of five preliminary investigations from both 2015 and 2019. Of these cases, about a third involve pushing and other milder acts of violence while just over half involve punching and kicking. In just over one in ten preliminary investigations, the victims are subjected to aggravated assault.

Weapons are seen in a third of all preliminary investigations where only boys are suspected of the robbery, and in such cases knives are by far the most commonly used weapons. A comparison between 2015 and 2019 shows, however, that the percentage of robberies involving weapons has decreased during the period. On the other hand, the percentage of suspects wearing masks has increased.

Acts of force and humiliation in youth robberies

In recent years, Swedish media have had quite a strong focus on robberies involving humiliation. There is, however, no definition of the circumstances determining when a robbery is to be classified as involving humiliation. Moreover, there is no legal definition of the concept. Nevertheless, a review of preliminary investigations shows that some robberies are characterised by a desire to further harm, intimidate or demean the victims. In order to analyse and describe this type of robbery, six different categories of acts of force and humiliation were defined: perverting the course of justice, excessive violence, control of the victims, demonstration of power with elements of humiliation, photographs and videos, and verbal abuse.

When all the suspects in a robbery are boys, the results show that the use of force and humiliation is seen in more than one third of the preliminary investigations into robbery. A comparison between the years 2015 and 2019 shows that the percentage of youth robberies involving the use of force and humiliation has not increased during the period, with the results indicating a decrease instead. The most common category is perverting the course of justice, which involves the suspected boys threatening the victims with various consequences if they report the crime or refuse to withdraw their police reports.

In preliminary investigations with at least one girl as a suspect, the use of force and humiliation is seen in about two thirds of cases. The most common category is a demonstration of power with elements of humiliation, which involves, for example, forcing the victim to remove their clothing, kiss someone's shoes or apologise for something. It can also involve the suspects cutting off some of the victim's hair, spitting on the victim, taking a valuable item to taunt them or "taxing" (penalising) the victim by robbing them.

Victims and their parents worried following robberies

Almost half of the preliminary investigations note that the victims experience fear and worry after being robbed. In interviews, several parents of victims also reported fear and worry, felt by both themselves and their children, after their children had been robbed. They describe, for example, how their children want to come home early in the evening, are afraid of running into one of the perpetrators and even want to move away. Several parents stated that they would have benefitted from more support in their parental role, not least advice on how best to help their children without "making things worse" or "making it bigger than it is".

In addition to fear and worry, it is not uncommon for both victims and perpetrators to experience feelings of guilt and shame after a robbery.

Victims may blame themselves for being in the wrong place, wearing designer clothing or anything else they think may have contributed to them being robbed. Interviews with convicted offenders also reveal reflections on guilt and shame.

A special review of girl suspects

As mentioned above, it is rare for girls to be suspected of robbery, although the percentage increased during the period 2015–2019. Accordingly, in this study, all preliminary investigations from the specified period with at least one girl suspect have been reviewed. Two thirds of these preliminary investigations stem from Police Region Stockholm.

When all the suspects in a robbery are girls, they are all most commonly under 15. When the suspects include both boys and girls, the ages are usually more varied. In preliminary investigations where all suspects are girls, the victims are generally other girls. On the other hand, when both boys and girls are suspected of robbery, it is generally other boys who are robbed, although the pattern remains the same – when the suspects are predominantly girls, other girls are usually robbed, and vice versa.

When at least one of the suspects in a robbery is a girl, the nature of the robbery differs slightly from those where only boys are suspected. As an example, in two thirds of such cases, the suspects are not unknown to their victims. The victim may be a casual acquaintance, someone from school, a former friend or someone in their social circle. The most common approach involves a diversionary strategy, such as the suspects luring the victim away to a place where they can rob them.

As mentioned above, the use of force and elements of humiliation are seen in the majority of preliminary investigations in which at least one of the robbery suspects is a girl. Furthermore, explicit threats are seen in almost three out of four of these preliminary investigations, and some form of violence in about four out of five of them. As regards violence, almost a quarter of the cases involve pushing and other mild violence, and just over half involve punching and kicking. One in five victims is subjected to aggravated assault.

In about one in eight preliminary investigations, photographs and videos are recorded in conjunction with the robbery, which is a much higher percentage than when only boys are suspected of a robbery, where this is seen only in isolated cases. Occasionally, these photographs and videos are shared via social media and have then been used as evidence in the preliminary investigations.

Robbery motives include money, excitement, status and conflicts. When only boys are suspected of a robbery, the motives are generally money, status and excitement. Sometimes, suspected boys also cite an underlying conflict or a past insult as a motive for the robbery. Conflict as a motive is even more common in robberies where the suspects include girls. The underlying reasons for the robbery are often bullying, jealousy, alleged rumour mongering or suspects disliking the victim for some reason. The fact that status is a motive for girl suspects can help to explain the excessive violence and relatively high incidence of acts of force and humiliation in these robberies.

Brå's assessment

This is a study into youth robbery, with the hope that the knowledge presented in this report will generate further discussions on youth robbery, in particular among organisations working with and close to young people. Many young people worry about being robbed, and falling victim has serious consequences.

This study shows that youths commit robberies throughout Sweden. However, youths from socially disadvantaged areas are overrepresented among the suspects. This supports the idea that discussions about the results and possible measures need to be linked to the general criminal gang activity in some of these areas, as well as the criminal culture that older people pass on to younger people. Since about half of all robberies are committed by someone who has been suspected of more than one robbery, and nearly a quarter of youth suspects have been suspected on more than one occasion, the results are in line with Brå's study on robbery as a strategic offence for a continued criminal career. Considering the whole, robbery must be prevented at both a structural level, in the same way as other gang-related crime, and an individual level, with targeted interventions by both social services and the police when a youth is first reported for robbery.

However, even though the efforts of society are central to helping these young people, their parents are the ones closest to them. It is important that parents are offered the best possible support when their child is embarking on a life of crime in this manner, both to strengthen them in their parental role and to support them and the rest of the family in their own crisis when their child is subjected to, or suspected or convicted of, robbery. In interviews with parents of young victims of crime, almost all report a lack of support in their parental role. Support for young victims of crime is available through, for example, support centres, although it may be beneficial for municipalities to review the support and information offered to parents as well.

According to the Swedish Police Authority, youth robberies are prioritised through, for instance, partnerships with other organisations, increased police presence, camera surveillance and fast-tracked investigations if the robbery suspect is under 18. Brå would also like to see the Swedish Police Authority investigate the economic aspects of these robberies, such as the sale of stolen goods via online trading sites and social media. It is also important to know which stores are enabling youth robberies by buying stolen goods.

The development seen among suspected girls is a cause for concern, especially in Police Region Stockholm. Accordingly, another take-home from the results is for the Swedish Police Authority to look into why Police Region Stockholm accounts for two thirds of youth robberies in which at least one of the suspects is a girl. Could it be that cases are recorded differently throughout Sweden when a single report includes several offences (such as assault, perverting the course of justice and robbery), that Police Region Stockholm is better than other regions at highlighting the fact that girls are involved in the robberies, or that the figures reflect actual differences in the number of girls suspected of robbery across the regions?

The results indicate that youth robberies involve more violence today than in the study Brå conducted in Malmö and Stockholm 20 years ago. Accordingly, it would be interesting to conduct a study on developments in assault among youths, and for such a study to highlight the capacity for violence among girls.