



The impact of the pandemic on the workflow within the legal chain

**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 2021:4

Summary

The consequences of the pandemic for Swedish society first became noticeable one week into March of 2020, and had become particularly apparent by the middle of the month. Rules and regulations concerning social distancing were introduced, which resulted in a reduction of movement and activity within society. The pandemic has continued to set its mark on society since then, even if the restrictions were somewhat milder during the summer and the beginning of the autumn. In response to the increased spreading of infection, however, the guidelines were tightened again at the end of October/beginning of November.

It is reasonable to imagine that the restrictions and the reductions in movement and activity in society may have had an effect on crime, and Brå has therefore, since April 2020, been conducting a monthly analysis to determine whether the number of reported crimes has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The legal system has also been affected by the pandemic – for example, the risk of infection resulted in the cancellation of planned staff training, which led to an increase in the availability of resources for regular work.

This report therefore features an analysis of the effects of the pandemic on the inflow and outflow of cases in the Police Authority, the Prosecution Authority and the courts. The analysis concerns the developments until the end of December 2020. For background, the introduction describes how the number of police reports developed during the course of the year, in comparison with 2019. The figures in this section were obtained from Brå's previously published monthly PMs concerning the effects of the pandemic on reported crime, but the discussions of the causes of the changes that were observed are not identical to those included in the monthly PMs.

Number of reported crimes increased in certain crime categories and decreased in others

The number of crimes that were reported during the period March to December increased gradually each year between 2015 and 2019. If the development of the number of reports during March to December in 2020 had followed the previous trend, this increase would have continued. Instead, however, the trend was broken, and the number of reported crimes decreased somewhat (by one per cent).

The reporting level in 2020 compared to 2019, however, varied between different crime types. For certain crime types, there was a reduction in the number of reports, whilst for others there was an increase. The overall picture of the observed changes shows that, compared with 2019, the

number of reported crimes largely corresponded to the two waves of the pandemic and the social restrictions that were imposed. The reporting level during the summer and early autumn, when there was a reduction in infection levels, differed less significantly from the level in 2019.

In general terms, when considered in the context of the two waves of the pandemic, the *reductions* in the number of reports can largely be said to correspond to the changes in society as a result of the pandemic. For example, there was a reduction in the number of reports of assault between strangers, which can be assumed to be attributable to the restrictions on entertainment and nightlife.

There are, however, also crime types for which there was a reduction in the number of reports but where there were no indications that the reduction was due to the pandemic having an impact on crime. On the other hand, the police had changed their procedures in such a way that could explain the decrease in the number of reports. The clearest example of this concerns the decrease in reported cases of drunk-driving during 2020, where the police had taken the decision in March to not conduct any planned driver checks as a result of the risk of infection.¹

There are also certain crimes for which there was a reduction in the number of reports in 2020 compared to 2019, but where the decrease had already begun prior to March, when the pandemic first began to seriously affect Sweden. This primarily concerns cases of fraud.

The crime types for which the number of reports increased were primarily criminal damage and narcotics offences. In these cases, the increased level should mainly (criminal damage) or partially (narcotics offences) be able to be explained by the police having had more time to detect and register such crimes. There are no indications that changes had taken place within society during the pandemic that would account for the actual increase in this kind of crime, relative to 2019.

The diagram below summarises the trends of the largest crime categories where the number of reports changed between 2019 and 2020, divided into whether the number of reports is thought to be due to an actual change in the level of crime or a change in the work of the police. The diagram shows that there is no crime category where there are any clear indications that there was an actual increase during the pandemic, although there are indications of actual reductions.

¹ The possibility that the pandemic contributed to fewer people driving while under the influence of alcohol cannot, however, be excluded. As no planned driver checks were conducted, it is difficult to express an opinion about this.

Crime categories for which there have been fewer or more reports respectively during March–December 2020, compared with March–December 2019, and whether this can be explained by changes in the authorities’ activities or social changes.

	More reports	Fewer reports
Changes in the approach of the authorities	Criminal damage Narcotics offences Benefit fraud	Drunk-driving
Social changes		Assault between strangers, robbery Theft, fraud

The production of the legal system increased during 2020

In summarising the overall work of the legal system during 2020, the clearest conclusion would be that there was an increase in production within all three authorities, relative to 2019. In the main, this should be attributable to all three of the studied authorities having had more resources than normal for the processing of cases.²

One explanation for this, as suggested by all of the authorities, is that a large proportion of all staff training had been cancelled as a result of the pandemic. The assessment of the police is that there was also a reduction in both the number and the length of meetings. For the police, there was also a reduction in certain types of work duties, such as the policing of sporting events and state visits. There was also a reduction in both the workload of the border police and in the number of passport applications. Seen as a whole, this provided the police with additional capacity for other forms of work, such as the registration and investigation of crime.

This has meant that, in addition to the Police Authority, the Prosecution Authority and the courts were also able to increase their production. During the pandemic, the police have had more resources available to process cases and to present them to prosecutors. The Prosecution Authority has been able to bring more prosecutions for suspected crimes and reduce its balance relative to 2019, and the courts have passed judgement on more criminal cases. This is illustrated in Table 12, which shows both how much greater the authorities’ inflow was, and how much greater the outflow was in the form of cases presented to prosecutors, prosecutions brought for suspected crimes, and judgements on criminal cases, during the period March to December in 2020, compared with the corresponding period in 2019.

² For the Prosecution Authority, production is measured in terms of suspected crimes and not cases.

Changes in the authorities' production during March–December 2020, compared with the equivalent period in 2019.

	Police	Prosecution Authority	Courts
			+2,919
			criminal
			cases
Inflow	- 7,617 reported crimes	+ 24,582 suspected crimes received	received
Processed	+ 31,627 cases cleared		
			+6,218
			criminal case
Outflow	+ 13,122 reported cases	+14,463 suspected crimes prosecuted	judgements

An additional factor that is deemed to have contributed to the police's processing of more cases, and to the courts having received and passed judgement on more criminal cases, during 2020 compared to 2019 is the expansion of the *Snabbare lagföring* working model. This model involves a reduction in the extent to which several reports relating to one and the same person are merged together and treated as one case and one court case, with each instance instead being processed separately. This increases the number of cases being dealt with by the police and the courts. On the other hand, this has not affected the number of suspected crimes received by the Prosecution Authority, because, unlike the other authorities, they do not count the number of cases.

The increase in production is mainly thought to involve relatively simple cases – usually those where the police report is initiated by the police or another authority, such as narcotics offences or cases of benefit fraud. Fraud in general was also processed to a greater extent in 2020 than had previously been the case. There are, however, no indications that crimes of a more serious nature, that are more difficult to investigate, were investigated or passed judgement on to any greater extent during 2020 than previously. In fact, it is thought that the courts have to a greater extent postponed more serious cases as a result of the pandemic.