



Evaluation of the Sexual Crimes Group in North Stockholm

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Authors: Mona Backhans, Anna Horgby and Lars Lewenhagen

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, Box 1386, 111 93 Stockholm, Sweden
Tel: +46(0)8 527 58 400, E-mail: info@bra.se, www.bra.se

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English summary of Brå report 2021:7

Summary

In September 2019, the North Stockholm Police District set up a special investigation team, the Sexual Crimes Group, which only investigates rape cases.¹ The group is part of a regional development project on the handling of sexual crime cases. Previously, many rape cases were investigated by the Serious Crime sections (Grova brott) but were often down-prioritised due to a high influx of other serious crimes, such as gang-related shootings, resulting in long investigation times and a high backlog of cases. The purpose of the Sexual Crimes Group is thus to reduce investigation times and simultaneously improve the quality of rape investigations. A further purpose was to achieve an increase in the proportion of cases that were finally reported to the prosecution office.

Since the Sexual Crimes Group was introduced, the majority of rape cases in the police district of North Stockholm have now been investigated in the same place instead of being spread across eight teams in two sections for serious crimes, the section for crime in close relationships (Brott i nära relation, BINR) and different local police districts. The fact that the group only investigates rape cases provides a protected space to concentrate on these investigations. The investigators in the group have applied to work there and bring a variety of previous experience and skills to their role. The number of investigators has increased since the group began from 11 to 17, which means an increase in resources compared with before the group was set up.

Brå's evaluation

In autumn 2019, Brå was asked to evaluate the Sexual Crimes Group by the Stockholm police region. The overarching purpose of the evaluation is to investigate whether the introduction of the Sexual Crimes Group has led to better investigative work in rape cases handled within the North Stockholm police district. The questions the project asks are:

- 1 Has the introduction of the Sexual Crimes Group led to shorter investigation times and a higher proportion of cases reported to the prosecutors in North Stockholm?
- 2 Has the quality of the investigations increased since the introduction of the Sexual Crimes Group?
- 3 What is the experience of actors in the legal process and victims of suspected rape of the work of the Sexual Crimes Group?

¹ Includes rape, aggravated rape and negligent rape, as well as attempted rape.

Methodology and data

To answer question 1, we are using the Swedish Police Authority's register data on reported rapes or attempted rapes of people aged 15 or over. The data is reported divided into four time periods: the implementation period plus the equivalent period in previous years, going back to 2016 (periods 1–3).

Three outcomes are studied:

- Investigation time (median) for all incoming cases including pending cases.
- Proportion of cases remaining pending after 150 days.
- Proportion of cases finally reported to the prosecution office.

The cases have been analysed at police district level (27 districts), where North Stockholm is compared with the police district or districts showing a similar trend in the outcome concerned before the Sexual Crimes Group was introduced (on 9 September 2019).

Question 2 is answered by examining pre-trial investigation material from the Sexual Crimes Group and from the Serious Crime sections during the same period in the year before the group was introduced. The assessment of the quality of rape investigations is based on quality criteria on *what* is done in the investigations, *when* it is done and *how* it is done. *What* concerns the scope of investigative measures, *when* the speed at which the investigations are carried out, and *how* the skill and the approach with which the investigations are conducted. Certain metrics are visible directly from register data, such as the number of interviews and the time between a report of rape being made to the police and interviews being conducted. To supplement the review of pre-trial investigations, we have therefore also analysed scope and speed based on register data. Here the purpose was to be able to include a larger number of cases than those that were examined qualitatively.

Question 3 is answered by means of surveys and interviews with lawyers (counsels for an injured party and defence counsels), prosecutors and victims of suspected rape. We also interviewed investigators in the Sexual Crimes Group and one representative of the Stockholm Police Region's forensic analysis team. The ambition of the study was also to investigate the view of suspects of rape but this did not prove possible for various reasons.

Investigation times have been reduced in North Stockholm

Investigation times have been reduced in North Stockholm since the Sexual Crimes Group was introduced. Our analysis of trends before and after the implementation period shows that North Stockholm has reduced its investigation times by approximately 30 days more than the average for the

police districts that showed similar trends as North Stockholm up until the new group was introduced. During the implementation period, North Stockholm had an investigation time of just over 70 days, which is 20 days lower than the median for the rest of Sweden. The reduction is equivalent to a reduction in investigation time of about 28 percent compared with before the Group's introduction.

Slow cases are defined as cases with an investigation time of more than 150 days, and the proportion of such cases has also fallen more (by approximately 10 percentage points) in North Stockholm than in the comparison districts combined. In the periods before the introduction of the new group, the proportion was just over 40 percent in North Stockholm compared with 30 percent in the period after the group was introduced. This is five percentage points lower than the rest of Sweden.

It is unlikely that the entire improvement is due to the introduction of the Sexual Crimes Group. For example, the analysis shows that Stockholm North also reduced its investigation times and reduced the proportion of slow cases significantly in 2017 compared with the control group, without any such organisational changes. Above all in terms of the proportion of slow cases, North Stockholm also started out at a significantly higher level than the control areas, so there was greater scope for improvement.

Minor change in the proportion of cases finally reported

The proportion of cases reported to the prosecution office increased gradually in North Stockholm throughout the period studied and is now at the same level as the rest of Sweden (15 percent). However, the difference in trends between North Stockholm and the control districts combined is very small. The proportion of cases finally reported has increased throughout the time period studied and the introduction of a specialist unit has not changed the underlying trend.

Although certain scope for improvement still remains, it is perhaps not possible to achieve much higher rates in terms of the proportion of cases finally reported to the prosecution office. The reasons are that many rape cases involve evidential problems, delays in reporting cases to the police, and victims not wishing to proceed. There are thus factors that impact on outcomes which are difficult for the investigating unit to influence.

Another aspect is that it is likely that the strict prioritisation necessary when rape investigations were the responsibility of the Serious Crime sections led to poorer quality mainly of the investigations that were down-prioritised. In order for higher quality to lead to more cases reaching the prosecution office, the investigations which used to be of lower priority must have the potential to lead to prosecution. If the previous sifting process was accurate, on the

other hand, improvements in the investigation process will only lead to a marginal improvement in clear-up rates. Based on this perspective, it is reasonable to assume that quality may have been improved without this having any major impact on the proportion of cases that are ultimately prosecuted.

More robust and rapid investigations

Brå's review of pre-trial investigations and supplementary analysis of register data indicates that the quality has increased in that the investigations are more robust, and have been conducted more rapidly since the Sexual Crimes Group was introduced. The most significant improvement is that the proportion of investigations with serious shortcomings has decreased, in terms of both measures taken (*what*) and the speed of the investigations (*when*).

The proportion of cases where Brå has assessed that the police did not take sufficient measures has fallen from 15 percent to 5 percent. The Sexual Crimes Group also commissions a somewhat higher number of forensic medical certificates than the Serious Crime sections used to, uses coercive measures to a higher extent, and conducts a somewhat higher number of interviews with witnesses. There are also indications that reconnaissance work has been improved. However, other aspects remain relatively unchanged, such as securing forensic evidence, following up on interview statements, the proportion being interviewed among people suspected on reasonable grounds, and the proportion of victims who drop out of the investigation. The Sexual Crimes Group also had a higher proportion of over-investigated cases than the Serious Crime sections, 6 percent compared with 2 percent, indicating that resources were not always used optimally.

The proportion of cases in which Brå assessed that there are serious shortcomings in speed, in other words, where slow processing may have affected the outcome, has fallen from 12 percent to 3 percent. This is partly because the Sexual Crimes Group contacts the victim and arranges counsel for them more quickly than the Serious Crime sections used to. In nine out of ten cases, the first contact was made with the victim within 24 hours of the Sexual Crimes Group receiving the case, and in just under half of cases, counsel was arranged within 24 hours. This is a clear improvement. Considerably fewer days also pass between the report being made and the Sexual Crimes Group interviewing victims and suspects.

Brå also assessed that the quality of interviews has improved and that the Sexual Crimes Group is more meticulous in its documentation.

Actors in the legal process are positive regarding the quality of the Sexual Crimes Group's investigations

The prosecutors who participated in the study are very positive towards the Sexual Crimes Group and confirm the improvements in quality and speed shown by the review of pre-trial investigations and register data. They also state that the Sexual Crimes Group is more proactive in its communication with prosecutors and in proposing investigative measures (such as initial measures and securing forensic evidence) compared with previously. The prosecutors explain this by the investigators being more motivated and competent and that they are able to concentrate on these cases undisturbed. At the same time, some state that the Sexual Crimes Group put unwarranted effort into certain cases.

Lawyers who participated in the study state that they have little experience of the Sexual Crimes Group and sometimes cannot distinguish between the group's investigations and those of the Serious Crime sections. They are less positive towards the Sexual Crimes Group compared with the prosecutors, but they too assess that the police have increased their knowledge on sexual crimes since the Sexual Crimes Group was introduced and that the quality of interviews has thus improved.

Counsel for injured parties are particularly positive regarding the way in which the Sexual Crimes Group treats victims of suspected rape and consider that the investigators are more respectful and empathetic than was previously the case. On the other hand, defence counsels find that suspects receive more or less the same treatment and information as before. Defence counsels are the least positive towards the Sexual Crimes Group, which may reflect a greater focus on victims in the group's investigations. Some defence counsels highlight that the investigators' high commitment to victims, and their desire to achieve a prosecution, may lead to a lack of objectivity. For example, they consider that the accounts of victims and their supporting evidence has not always been questioned and that investigators may have been swayed by long, detailed interviews with victims before suspects are interviewed. Considering this, it is regrettable that we were unable to include the experiences of suspects themselves of the work of the police in the study. Brå therefore would encourage future studies of this issue.

Few victims of suspected rape took part in the study but the vast majority are very satisfied with the way they were treated by the Sexual Crimes Group. They consider that they were taken seriously and that the police listened to their accounts. The criticism given largely concerns a lack of information, communication and feedback. However, it is mainly the counsels for the injured party who are to inform the victims of the investigation, not the police. There are therefore grounds to investigate further what role counsels

for the injured party and defence counsels have and should have, what demands that can be made of them, and how they should be appointed.

Brå's assessment

Brå assesses that the organisational model with a specialised rape unit has worked well in the police district of North Stockholm. The Sexual Crimes Group process their cases more rapidly and their investigations are of a higher quality than was previously the case. The proportion of cases assessed to be over-investigated has increased somewhat but is still small (6 percent of the cases examined).

Brå can see several advantages of specialisation: The investigators are motivated and the group builds up competence and effective procedures, and the same investigator is responsible for a case from start to finish. This guarantees investigative work of a consistently high quality. The fact that the Sexual Crimes Group only investigates rape cases also means that time and energy is ring-fenced for these crimes, i.e. a real increase in resources compared with previously. Additionally, resources have increased since the group was introduced and more investigators have been employed. Brå assesses that the improvements in quality and speed are also due to the increase in resources and not solely due to specialisation.

The proportion of cases finally reported to the prosecution office has increased somewhat but not much more than in similar police districts. There is still some scope for improvement but Brå considers that a marked increase in the proportion of cases finally reaching prosecutors cannot be expected considering the nature of the cases and because there are factors that impact on outcomes which are difficult for the investigating unit to influence.

Brå considers that legal rights for victims in rape cases have improved since the introduction of the Sexual Crimes Group, above all through more robust investigations. Certain quality aspects are also positive for suspects, including better documentation and investigations being conducted more quickly. However, defence counsels and prosecutors see a risk of shortcomings in objectivity which could be negative for suspects. Brå considers that the risk of a loss of objectivity should continue to be borne in mind.

Thus, specialisation has worked well in North Stockholm, but it cannot be taken as an indication that this is an organisational model which would suit all police districts. Local conditions must decide where rape cases are investigated in organisational terms. However, some lessons learned from the development efforts in North Stockholm should be able to be transferred to districts where a specialised group cannot be introduced or where different organisational models are chosen.