



Serious Violence at School

A description of its extent, nature and developments through 2022

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

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through 2022

English summary of Brå report 2024:3

Summary

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) has been instructed by the Government to investigate the extent and development of serious school violence in order to improve the knowledge on violence in schools and strengthen crime prevention efforts (Ministry of Justice 2022/02223). This assignment constitutes a follow-up to an earlier assignment given to Brå over a decade ago, which resulted in the report *Serious Violence at School* (Brå report 2009:6). Since publication of that report, serious acts of violence in Swedish schools have been few, but some have been very serious. The Government also considers that the threat faced by schools has worsened (Terms of Reference 2022:86).

The questions examined in the report are as follows:

- How common is serious violence in schools?
- What characterises serious school violence in Sweden?
- What has changed since 2009?

The report is based on three principal data sets

The report's findings and conclusions are based on three data sets, as well as references to previous research:

- The first data set comprises a sample of police investigations into incidents of serious violence at school that had been registered by the police as completed aggravated assault (a total of 200 incidents from the years 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022) or as completed, attempted, or preparation to commit murder or manslaughter (a total of 83 incidents, of which 7 were completed, 33 attempted, and 43 involved preparation offences, during the period 2010-2022).
- The second data set comprises responses from Brå's *School Survey on Crime*, 1995–2021 (with an in-depth analysis of the years 2015–2021). This survey is conducted every two years among a large number of ninth graders, and their responses allow us to describe the extent of serious violence in schools. The survey also allows us to describe which groups of children report higher levels of exposure to serious school violence based on experiences of e.g. bullying, victimisation, and involvement in crime.

- The third data set comprises responses to a survey of head teachers. This survey was conducted in the spring of 2023, with the aim of investigating the prevalence and nature of serious violence against pupils, teachers, and other school staff. A total of 335 head teachers responded to the survey.

Defining serious violence

This report defines serious school violence as physical violence requiring medical treatment. On the basis of the police investigations examined in the study, it is not always clear whether medical treatment was necessary as a result of the incidents reported to the police, and for this reason a weight-of-evidence assessment has been made based on the injuries described, the severity of the violence, and the presence of weapons. The report's definition of serious school violence is thus primarily limited to physical violence of a severe nature, which in legal terms would be deemed aggravated assault, murder, or manslaughter (including attempted homicide offences and preparation to commit such offences).

Serious school violence is a rare phenomenon

The results of the study show that serious violence leading to injuries requiring medical attention is rare. For example, the results of the head teacher survey show that in 3 of 4 schools, no serious violence had occurred during the last academic year, and during the four years selected for the study of incidents of serious school violence reported to the police, approximately 50 incidents per year were identified. The most serious cases of violence, involving a risk to life or health, are thus very uncommon in the school environment.

However, the *School Survey on Crime* shows that, among 15-year-olds, the serious violence that does occur most often occurs at school: 2.4 percent of boys, and 1.5 percent of girls, report having been subjected to violence requiring some form of medical treatment during the past year, and that the most recent incident took place in a school environment. This means that almost half of all incidents of serious violence affecting 15-year-olds have reportedly occurred at school.

Some groups of children are more vulnerable than others

The incidents of serious school violence reported to the police, and the incidents reported in the head teacher survey, both show that almost 9 of 10 victims, and more than 9 of 10 perpetrators, are male. The results also show that while the number of violent incidents decreases with the age of the pupils, the violence also becomes more severe, and both the victims and the perpetrators of the various kinds of lethal violence reported to the police are found among the oldest children. The results also show that the severity of incidents is related to both gender and age; males and older children are more likely to commit serious violence than females and younger children.

Further, the *School Survey on Crime* shows that exposure to school violence varies between groups of individuals. For example, those who report having been bullied are five times as likely to be a victim of serious school violence. Students who are victims of severe violence at school are also more likely to experience other types of victimisation, such as less serious assaults, threats, or sexual offences. Involvement in various types of criminal activity and anti-social behaviour is also significantly more common in this group. Girls who are victims of serious school violence are more likely than boys to report being victims of other offences. A higher proportion of victims also have friends with a history of involvement in offending, as well as a more permissive attitude towards crime. Victims of serious violence at school are almost four times as likely to have engaged in serious violence themselves.

Serious school violence is unevenly distributed among schools

Analyses of both police-reported incidents of serious school violence and the head teacher survey also show significant variations between schools in the prevalence of violence. Municipal schools and schools located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas are among those most affected by violence. Secondary schools (grades 7 to 9) were also more affected by serious violence than other schools. At the same time, many of the most severe violent incidents occur in upper-secondary schools, as the severity of incidents increases with age.

The nature of serious school violence

The study's analyses show that a typical case of serious school violence involves two boys, both of whom are students, in a public space at a municipal secondary school (grades 7 to 9). Violence is as likely as not to involve the use of a weapon or an improvised weapon. The most severe cases, which result in life-threatening injuries or death, are further characterised by a greater likelihood that the violence involved some type of weapon (usually a knife).

The circumstances surrounding cases of so-called school attacks (the vast majority of which are reported to the police at the preparatory stage) are largely consistent with previous research. Most involve young boys with an interest in violence and weapons who feel unfairly treated and who have posted their plans to violently attack their school online.

Some offenders have substantial support needs

The results also show that the offenders in many cases have significant support needs. Previous research has also linked mental health with school violence, showing that children with higher rates of mental illness or complex problems are more likely to be involved in violent incidents (Göransson et al., 2011). The police investigations examined in the study confirm that a significant proportion of the most serious offenders have a medical condition, support needs, or are suffering from mental ill-health. Answers to open-response questions in the head teacher survey also show that individuals who commit acts of serious violence are known to have had problems, and that they have previously repeatedly committed violent acts and engaged in other problem behaviours.

Serious school violence has not increased

Overall, the report's findings show no apparent increase in the prevalence of serious violence in schools over the past 15 years. The proportion of pupils in year 9 who report having been subjected to serious school violence has not increased during the period 1995–2021. On the contrary, violence decreased during the years around 2010, and during the subsequent period the proportion experiencing victimisation remained relatively unchanged, at a lower level than that of the previous decade. Healthcare data on children and youth who have received treatment for violence-related

injuries shows a clear decrease during the period 2010-2015, followed by a slight subsequent increase through 2019.

This change over time is due to a decrease in the prevalence of violence against boys. Girls' exposure to serious school violence has remained stable throughout the period 1995–2021. Girls are therefore exposed to a greater proportion of violent incidents now than in the past.

Evidence of an increased reporting rate

The number of police reports focused on serious school violence is greater today than at the time of Brå's previous report. This increase may in part be due to a greater number of incidents, but there are indications that the increase is more likely due to an increased rate of reporting. In the *School Survey on Crime*, for example, the proportion of incidents which had been reported to the police has increased from 15 to 25 percent since Brå's previous (2009) report. The likelihood of an increased reporting propensity is also suggested by the fact that schools themselves have accounted for an increasing share of those reporting violent incidents to the police.

Increase in the number of particularly severe cases

While serious school violence is not deemed to have become more common, some findings indicate that the severity and the nature of serious school violence may have changed since the decade prior to 2010. In Brå's 2009 report *Serious Violence at School*, it was noted that Sweden had largely been spared from incidents of lethal school violence, while this report has identified seven cases¹ of completed homicide that have occurred in the school environment during the period 2010–2022. The numbers are not large enough to discern any particular trends over the course of the period since 2010, but the results show that the incidence of particularly severe cases has increased.

A further change over time is an increase in the number of incidents registered by the police as preparation to commit murder or manslaughter. These police reports largely relate to planned school attacks, and although we cannot know how many of these planned attacks might have been realised if they had not been reported to the police, this was a phenomenon that was not noted or touched on in Brå's 2009 report *Serious Violence at*

¹ Including a total of 10 deceased victims.

School. The number of such police reports noted in the current study is likely to be due to a greater awareness and fear of school attacks, and numerous head teachers report having undergone ongoing lethal violence (PDV)² training (in English often known as active shooter/assailant training), also indicating a greater awareness and level of preparedness than during the period covered by Brå's previous report.

Analyses have been conducted to identify any changes over time in the nature of the incidents registered by the police as aggravated assault, but no such changes have been found in relation to, for example, school level (primary, secondary and upper-secondary schools), the presence of weapons, or the severity of injuries. In Brå's previous study, weapons had been present in half of the cases, which is in line with the results of this study. One change, however, is an increase in the prevalence of knife violence. In this study, knives were present in 3 out of 10 cases, whereas the previous study found that blunt instruments were most common, and knives were very rare.

Violence against teachers and other school staff

Teachers are also victims of serious school violence. However, few such incidents have been captured in the various data sources employed in this report. Only five percent of the surveyed head teachers reported that violent incidents targeting teachers and other school staff, and resulting in medical treatment, occurred at least once per semester, and none reported that it happened more often than this. Among incidents reported to the police, school staff were the primary victims in five percent of the incidents. The number of cases in which school staff had been victims is too small to observe any trends over time. However, results from other surveys and statistics published by the Swedish Work Environment Authority indicate that reports by teachers and school staff who have been victims of violence may have increased slightly, but that this is primarily due to a change in perceptions of violence, which has led to an increased rate of reporting.

² The acronym PDV, *pågående dödligt våld*, refers to one or more perpetrators who, often without warning and in a rapidly developing situation, attack a site or building, with the aim of randomly causing severe injury to the greatest extent possible. PDV training programmes are designed to enable Swedish schools to manage such situations as well as possible until police arrive on the scene (see, e.g., MSB 2018).

The National Council's assessment

Overall, the results indicate that serious violence in schools is relatively uncommon. The most serious cases, which threaten life or health, are rare. At the same time, the incidents that do occur have consequences, both for those involved and for fellow students and teachers, as well as causing worry about potential future violence. The results of the *School Survey on Crime* also show that among 15-year-olds who are subjected to violence, school is the most common location for this violence, and that violent victimisation has become increasingly concentrated to schools (as a result of a decrease in youth violence elsewhere). Exposure to serious school violence is also correlated with bullying and satisfaction with the school environment. Thus, it could be argued that schools have an increasingly important role to play in the prevention of serious violence among young people.

This report's findings show that there is significant variation in the level of victimisation and involvement in serious school violence, not least by gender, with boys being over-represented. Further, the results indicate that serious school violence involves a group of children, as both victims and perpetrators, who are vulnerable in various ways. The results show the importance of schools recognising potential perpetrators and victims of violence, and of equipping school staff with the skills to respond effectively to children with support needs. However, the results also show that schools cannot solve the problem of school violence without help. Schools cannot act in isolation from the rest of society, and effective cooperation with social services, psychiatric services, and on occasion the police, is necessary for society to fulfil its responsibility to protect children from violence.

This study also concludes that there is significant variation in the level of violence between schools. This suggests that any preventive work must be preceded by work to identify schools with specific problems and to match suitable interventions to the conditions of each school.

A further conclusion from the report's findings is that no major increase in the prevalence of serious violence at school appears to have occurred over the last 15 years. Other studies have also established that the total level of threats and violence in schools has not increased since 2015 (Brå 2024). However, there are indications that the nature of violence may have changed, including an increase in the number of particularly severe cases of knife violence and an increase in the number of cases of serious violence

resulting in fatalities. There is also evidence to indicate a change in reporting habits, not least with regard to school attacks that are still in the preparatory stages.