



# The police's work in connection with profiling and equal treatment

With a focus on discriminatory and ethnic profiling

## **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. We do this by providing factual information and disseminating knowledge on crime and crime prevention work, primarily for the Government and agencies in the criminal justice system.

The publication is available as a pdf at [www.bra.se](http://www.bra.se). On request, Brå can develop an alternative format. Please send any enquiry about alternative formats to [tillgangligt@bra.se](mailto:tillgangligt@bra.se). When material is quoted or tables, figures, and diagrams are used, Brå must be stated as the source. Permission of the copyright holder is necessary for reproduction of images, photographs, and illustrations.

This report is a summary of the Swedish report Polisens arbete med profilering och likabehandling 2023:12  
© Brottsförebyggande rådet 2023  
urn:nbn:se:bra-1153  
ISSN 1100-6676

Authors: Anna Öström, Lars Lewenhagen, Emma Patel and Sara Jonsson.

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

This summary can be downloaded from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention's website,  
[www.bra.se/publikationer](http://www.bra.se/publikationer)

# The police's work in connection with profiling and equal treatment

With a focus on discriminatory and ethnic profiling

**English summary of Brå report 2023:12**

# Summary

This report presents the results of Brå's study on the police's work in connection with profiling and equal treatment. The study stems from the Swedish Police Authority's request for an independent party to investigate what this work looks like at different levels within the organisation. The aim of the report is to contribute towards the Authority's development work within this area.

This is a complex subject to study. To address the questions in the study, Brå has therefore used several different types of data and methodological approaches, both qualitative and quantitative. One important contribution is the large number of interviews and conversations held with managers at different levels within the organisation, and with police officers on patrol duty. Significant parts of the report are thus based on what employees at both strategic and operational levels deem to be important in the work in connection with profiling and equal treatment.

The study has a particular focus on discriminatory ethnic profiling, which involves the police relying solely or primarily on an individual's ethnic origin when assessing who they check or suspect of crimes. The profiling work examined in this study mainly relates to suspected drug offences. This is a typical search and intervention offence in which the police have a relatively wide scope for action.

## **Police work on patrol duty in selected local police districts**

To get a picture of police officers' practical work in connection with profiling and equal treatment, Brå carried out field observations in seven selected local police districts. These areas were chosen to provide a picture of policing in different types of areas: city centres, rural areas, vulnerable areas, and large and medium-sized towns. Accompanying police officers provided an insight into aspects such as how they deal with the people they meet, the difficulties they face, how different types of checks and enforcement measures are carried out, and on what grounds. This has also been discussed in interviews with managers at different levels within the organisation, and in conversations with police officers on patrol duty.

### **Police officers have a strong focus on certain locations and vulnerable areas**

Sweden currently faces a serious situation with regard to the extensive network criminality that can be linked to drug-related crime. In terms of police work on patrol duty, this means that officers are often on patrol in places where they know that drug trafficking is taking place – mainly communication hubs, city centres and vulnerable areas. The data for the study suggests that this approach is a conscious strategy to reduce the supply and demand of drugs, reduce exposure to drugs and counter recruitment to criminal networks. This work includes an effort to build relationships and set boundaries – to a greater extent in some local police districts, and to a lesser extent in others. In short, the relationship-building approach involves the police working to build good relationships with local communities, organisations and businesses, as well as with local residents. Boundary-setting involves the police being clear and showing where the boundaries are if problems arise.

### **Experienced police officers are thought to carry out checks in a more balanced manner**

A police check can be perceived as intrusive, which means that the police must be able to balance an effective approach with the sense of indignation that checks and suspicions of crime can result in. In order for the police to be able to build trust with citizens, the checks carried out by police officers must also be seen as fair, legitimate and non-discriminatory.

However, building relationships and setting boundaries can be difficult, especially for young and relatively newly trained police officers. Both police officers' experience and good knowledge of the area and those individuals who make an area unsafe are something of a guarantee that the police use checks in a balanced way. In the study, for example, several experienced managers and police officers say that it is more important that identity checks or enforcement measures are 'done right' than that the police carry them out.

Based on the study's field observations, Brå notes that there are generally many relatively young and inexperienced police officers working on patrol duty in selected local police districts. About half of the police officers involved in the field observations had worked as police officers for less than two years. Moreover, in one of the vulnerable areas studied, it is common for police officers to work only temporarily in the area through the national

reinforcement organisation. These officers have neither local knowledge nor knowledge of the individuals in the area, which can increase the risk of carrying out checks on innocent people. This in turn can negatively affect people's legal security and long-term confidence-building work in the area.

### **Police work in connection with profiling**

Profiling is a legitimate method for simplifying and streamlining police work, and is used, for example, when police officers on patrol duty make assessments of who should be checked or could be suspected of a crime. In their profiling work, the police use various indicators – or building blocks, as they are called within the police – to make this kind of assessment. The common building blocks for profiling in connection with suspicions of drug offences are *deviant behaviour, time and place, signs of drug use, the smell of drugs* and *previous knowledge of the suspect*. In many cases, there is also intelligence about certain individuals or tips from the public, security officers, parents or schools, which form the basis for a check. It often takes several building blocks to establish a suspicion of a drug offence against an individual.

When police officers on patrol duty talk about how they work with profiling, they often describe how they initially look out for deviant behaviour, especially in certain places and at certain times. At the same time, many emphasise that the first impulse is not always about being convinced that something actually is 'deviant'. Instead, several police officers describe becoming *curious* about an individual or a circumstance, and therefore making initial contact. During their conversation with an individual, police officers obtain more information, which can be crucial when deciding whether to proceed with an identity check, a body search or a body examination.

### **There is no guidance for profiling work**

It is important that the issue of equal treatment and people's legal security does not get overlooked in the police's profiling work, especially in view of the fact that the police often need to make quick decisions based on limited information. The police also have a responsibility to combat discrimination against individuals.

This study shows that no strategy or guidance has been drawn up for profiling or in terms of what is expected of police officers in a check situation. They therefore have to rely on what they have learned during

their police training, what the legislation says (where there is no requirement for evidence), and their own assessments and those of their colleagues in various situations. Although police officers are trained to spot what other people might not necessarily notice, there is always a risk that conscious or unconscious stereotypes about people may influence *who* the police initially take an interest in.

### **Policing difficulties in connection with checks and enforcement measures**

From interviews and conversations with police officers on patrol duty, it is clear that there are certain responses from those being checked that have a negative impact on police officers' work situation. In particular, this involves violence or threats against police officers or their families. Police officers are also filmed and subjected to verbal abuse or various types of accusations. For example, it is relatively common for them to be called 'racist', but none of the police officers say they have avoided taking action against an individual to avoid being called racist. Most police officers say that they do not take this kind of attack personally. Instead, they see it as part of the job, and say that it is the 'uniform' people are angry about.

### **Field observations of police checks**

During field observations in selected local police districts, Brå was able to learn about more than 50 situations in which the police carried out identity checks, body searches, body examinations or vehicle checks. As the Swedish Police Authority does not provide any guidance for how police officers should work with profiling and carry out checks, Brå drew up its own relatively simple criteria when analysing its observations: 1) Whether the person in question was given an explanation for the check or enforcement measure carried out by the police; 2) Whether their treatment by the police was respectful and reasonable in relation to the situation; and 3) Whether the reasons (the building blocks) for the suspicion were comprehensible and relevant.

Overall, the set criteria were met in about three quarters of police checks and enforcement actions. Two of the set criteria were met in around a fifth of cases, and only one or none were met in a handful of check situations.

## **Drug offence suspicions and accuracy**

Another important contribution from this study is a case study of the police's drug offence suspicions for 2019–2021 in Sweden. These suspicions relate to the drug offences of possession, personal use and transfer. In total, the material includes more than 200,000 suspicions, spread across almost 160,000 cases and 88,000 individuals. It is therefore common for the same person to appear in several cases during the period, and for a case to include more than one suspicion.

Brå has studied how these suspicions are distributed based on different area variables and background variables (such as age, gender and ethnicity), and how accurate the police are in their suspicions based on these variables.

### **Young people, men and people with a foreign background are suspected more often**

As drug offences are so-called 'search and intervention offences', discriminatory ethnic profiling can manifest itself in the number of suspicions per inhabitant being higher for some societal groups than others. At the same time, over-representation in the statistics may be due to factors other than discrimination, for example if the group's actual criminality is higher or if their patterns of behaviour increase the risk of detection for other reasons. An example of the latter could be that two groups use drugs to equal extents, but one group does so mainly in private homes and the other in city centres.

The case study shows that men are suspected of drug offences to a significantly higher extent than women, and that most suspicions relate to the 15–24 age group. For the group born in Sweden with two foreign-born parents, the number of suspicions per inhabitant is 48, compared to 14 for those born in Sweden with two parents born in Sweden. However, the differences decrease significantly when age and gender are taken into account.

### **Number of suspicions per inhabitant is highest in vulnerable areas**

The case study also shows that the number of suspicions per inhabitant is highest in areas classified as vulnerable according to the police, or with significant socioeconomic challenges. One explanation is that the police have a greater presence and a sharper focus on drug offences in these areas.



Another explanation is that the proportion of young people is higher in these areas, and that they are relatively more likely to be outdoors due to overcrowding. This in turn involves a higher risk of detection. If the number of suspicions per inhabitant aged 15–24 is taken into account in the analyses, the differences between the types of areas also become much smaller. However, while the number of suspicions *per inhabitant* is higher in areas that are vulnerable or have socioeconomic challenges, the vast majority of suspicions have been established in other types of areas.

### **Accuracy varies greatly based on ethnic origin**

Another way of approaching the question of whether there are elements of discrimination in the police's profiling work is to investigate the accuracy of the police's suspicions, in other words how often the police are correct in their suspicions against different individuals or groups. The case study reveals that the proportion of so-called 'miss reports' – i.e. cases that have been closed on the grounds of *no offence* – is highest when the

suspect is born in Sweden with two foreign-born parents, and lowest when the suspect is born in Sweden with two parents born in Sweden.

Interestingly, the proportion of misses *does not* differ between people of different national backgrounds in the case of suspected transfer or personal use. For suspected possession of drugs, however, the differences are significant. For those born in Sweden with two parents born in Sweden, 15% of cases are written off as *no offence*. Among those born in Sweden with two foreign-born parents, the corresponding proportion is almost twice as high, at 27%.

### **People with roots in Africa and Southwest Asia are often suspected incorrectly**

Discrimination is often based on stereotypical perceptions about a person's *presumed* ethnicity. In this context, the distinction between Swedish and foreign background can be seen as being too blunt, as it does not take into account the fact that people with a foreign background are a heterogeneous group that can be treated differently based on external attributes.

Therefore, in order to refine the analysis, the proportion of miss reports involving suspicion of possession has been broken down according to the country of the mother's birth. These analyses show that the proportion of miss reports is highest among suspects whose mothers were born in an

African or Southwest Asian country, and lowest among suspects whose mothers were born in one of the Nordic countries.

When comparing these two groups, the total proportion of misses among suspects with mothers born in Africa or Southwest Asia is 30%, while the corresponding proportion for suspects with mothers born in the Nordic countries is 15%. The police are thus much more likely to be correct in their suspicions of possession in the case of people with a Nordic background compared to people with an African or Southwest Asian background. Regression analyses show that large differences between the groups remain when other factors such as gender, age, previous prosecutions and the character of the area are taken into account. The greatest differences between these groups are found in Police Region North, and the smallest in Police Region West.

Thus, regardless of the background variables included and the police region studied, systematic differences arise in the proportion of miss reports concerning suspected drug possession based on the suspect's ethnic background. The other data in the study may help to explain these differences to some degree, but it cannot be ruled out that the differences are also due to discriminatory ethnic profiling.

### **Profiling work can be influenced by several factors**

The review of the preliminary investigations shows that around one third of suspicions of drug offences were initiated by a party other than the police. Most commonly, these cases relate to tips from the public. In just under 15% of preliminary investigations, the suspicions were initiated by an arrest facility guard or a security officer. This usually involves the discovery of suspected drugs in connection with taking someone who is under the influence of alcohol or drugs into custody. Not entirely surprisingly, the accuracy rate is highest when the case is initiated by arrest facility guards or security officers, and lowest when the police themselves initiate a case.

### **Proactive and reactive policing**

There are significant differences between selected local police districts in terms of who has initiated suspicions. For example, the proportion of cases initiated by arrest facility guards or security officers is highest in the Gothenburg City local police district (Police Region West), while the

proportion of suspicions initiated by the police is highest in the Järva and Norrmalm local police districts (Police Region Stockholm).

The differences in how drugs cases are initiated – whether the police are proactive or reactive – are in line with the observed differences in accuracy between both local police districts and police regions. Accuracy is clearly lower in areas with a relatively high proportion of suspicions initiated by the police. This could also explain some of the differences in accuracy between suspects of different ethnicities. For example, when it comes to preliminary investigations of suspected drug possession, the proportion of cases initiated by the police is highest when the suspect has an African or Southwest Asian background.

### **The police's building blocks and documentation of suspicions**

A central aspect of the review of preliminary investigations has involved determining the reasons – the so-called building blocks – behind suspicions of drug offences. If the suspicions involve transfer or possession, the building blocks are often related to *deviant behaviour*, followed by *tips*. In the case of suspicions of personal use, *signs of drug use* dominate the descriptions in preliminary investigations instead. The building blocks that are missing to a greater or lesser extent when police officers document the reasons for suspicion are time, place, the suspect's clothing, gender, age and ethnicity; however, in interviews and conversations with managers and police officers on patrol duty, they are said to have a certain

significance in profiling work. Nevertheless, with the exception of clothing, the information usually appears in other areas of the investigations.

Furthermore, information about building blocks is detailed to a greater or lesser extent in police reports of suspicions of drug offences. In some cases, these building blocks are explained only in broad terms, such as “behaving in a deviant manner”. It also appears that the building blocks are listed more or less routinely. For example, in one local police district, the documentation in more than half of the preliminary investigations shows that the suspects appear to be nervous in various ways, while the word ‘nervous’ is hardly mentioned in the preliminary investigations in another district. It is therefore reasonable to assume that different local cultures can develop in terms of what police officers observe and what they write. If ‘appears to be nervous’ is a common observation and description in a local police district, new police officers can be socialised into that way of thinking

and writing. Nor can it be ruled out that people in certain areas have more negative experiences of the police, and therefore *are* more nervous when they come into contact with the police.

It is also not uncommon for there to be no record of body searches carried out. The data shows, for example, that records of searches carried out under the Swedish Code of Judicial Procedure are lacking in around a third of preliminary investigations. It also transpires that searches conducted under the Swedish Police Act are not always documented, or are not documented in a uniform manner. Inadequate documentation of enforcement measures is a serious matter, from the perspectives of both monitoring and legal security. Moreover, if a police check is reported, the police officers in question risk being convicted of misconduct if the reasons for the check are not accurately recorded, or if the reasons for using enforcement measures are not included in the documentation.

### **Three key perceptions of ethnicity as a building block**

Interviews and conversations with managers and police officers on patrol duty show that there are many ideas about ethnicity as a building block. These perceptions are also more divided than for gender and age, which are also important from an equality perspective. For example, most people can say frankly that women tend to go under the police's radar in their profiling work. When it comes to the question of ethnicity as a building block, it is clear that the people Brå spoke to in this study are more uncertain. However, there are three main types of views among police officers, which are referred to in this report as *dismissive*, *justifying* and *problematizing*.

The *dismissive* view involves managers and police officers in the study not believing that ethnicity is either relevant or present as a building block in profiling work. One common explanation is that it is not possible for police officers to profile on the basis of ethnicity because they work in a vulnerable area, where most people have a foreign background. Another explanation given by police officers is that the question of ethnicity is irrelevant, because any differences based on ethnicity are about class.

The second view is referred to in this report as *justifying*. Those police officers who raise this view say that ethnicity can be an important building block in profiling work. Police officers do this by referring to statistics and experiences, which show higher rates of drug offences among people with a foreign background or among certain ethnic groups. In these contexts, it is

not uncommon to discuss gang crime, family-based criminal networks or a certain type of drug linked to ethnic origin. Ethnicity as a building block is thus deemed to provide effectiveness in policing work.

A third view of ethnicity is referred to in this report as *problematizing*. In these cases, managers and police officers believe that discriminatory ethnic profiling is occurring or is likely to occur, which they consider to be serious. They therefore see this as an issue that needs to be monitored and discussed more within the organisation. In this context, the usefulness of existing statistics is questioned, as there may be a reproductive effect through the police's focus on vulnerable areas. "Where you look, you will find," as one police officer said in an interview. Several police officers also discuss the risk of the police adopting an 'us and them' perspective in police work, where the police's prejudices about certain minorities can affect their profiling work.

When it comes to the *significance* of ethnicity in the police's profiling work, the picture is thus divided. There is no common understanding of the issue within the Swedish Police Authority, and nor are there any clear differences between the strategic and operational levels. It is also clear that there is a lack of awareness among some managers and police officers on patrol duty that unconscious or conscious stereotyping of other people can affect the police's profiling work.

## **Complaints against the police**

One important question in the study is what characterises reports and complaints made against the police in relation to checks and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. Brå has therefore reviewed complaints against the police received by the Swedish Police Authority's Special Investigations Department (SU) and the Equality Ombudsman (DO).

### **Those who submit reports do not always understand why they have been checked**

It is clear from the reports submitted to SU and DO that the encounter with the police needs to be both comprehensible to the person being checked and perceived as fair. In several cases, it appears that people report the police because they do not understand the grounds on which they have been checked, or because they feel that the police have treated them disrespectfully in the check situation. There are also reports in which the

complainant believes that the police have discriminated against them on the basis of their ethnic background, or where they feel harassed by the police due to excessive checks. Overall, the reports also show how intrusive it can feel to be checked by the police.

It is also clear from the SU reports how the check situation can be perceived differently by the complainant and by police officers on patrol duty. For example, while complainants state in their reports that they question the checks, the police view complainants' behaviour as agitated, disorderly or involving mood swings, which police officers may perceive in certain cases as signs of being under the influence of drugs.

### **Little opportunity to pursue discrimination cases**

Current legislation means that both SU and DO have little opportunity to pursue cases involving crime reports against the police. This is because the criminal justice system is not an area of society that is covered by the Swedish Discrimination Act in terms of decisions and actions – only treatment by the police is included, and in these situations it is often a case of one party's word against the other's. However, reports received by SU may result in measures against an individual police officer from an employment law perspective.

### **Initiatives to promote equal treatment**

Failure to apply the principle of equal treatment in profiling work is a serious matter for the legal security and wellbeing of individuals, as well as for society as a whole. The presence of discrimination can also have a negative impact on trust in the police, and thus on the police's opportunities to work effectively. *Experiences* of discrimination can also have the same negative consequences. A central question in the work with this study therefore involves how the Swedish Police Authority works to promote equal treatment and to reduce the risk of discriminatory ethnic profiling.

### **Few group managers are aware of the strategy for culture and equal treatment**

A number of significant initiatives have been carried out in recent years, including the Swedish Police Authority drawing up a strategy relating to culture and equal treatment, the introduction of a communication tool (the Mission Compass) and the implementation of a reflection tool for employees (RIV). In this work, managers uphold the organisation's culture.

Digital training on equal treatment has also been developed, which all the Authority's employees are expected to complete.

The interviews show that most group managers have not read the latest version of the strategy for culture and equal treatment. This also applies to some senior managers, despite the strategy stating that issues of equal treatment should permeate all operations within the Authority. When it comes to the reflection tool, several group managers also say that they do not have enough time to carry out this work to the extent intended. Although equal treatment is addressed within the tool, no group manager that Brå spoke to has specifically discussed discriminatory ethnic profiling within the framework of the tool.

Most senior managers refer mainly to the work involved with the Mission Compass, and also to the equality councils that have been established within police regions and at national departments. Through these, they believe that the Authority has a structure for addressing and further developing the work involving equal treatment, and for dealing with skills development within this area. Although the Mission Compass and the equality councils mainly deal with internal issues, managers believe that they also contribute towards a better approach externally.

### **What can be done to reduce the risk of discrimination?**

Interviews and conversations with managers and police officers on patrol duty included discussions on what they can do to reduce the risk of both actual and perceived discrimination. Judging from the responses, there are four main actions that police officers on patrol duty can take, which represent a trust-building and relationship-building approach. These include police officers ensuring that the check is well-founded, explaining to the person in question why they are carrying out the check, conducting the check in a respectful manner and apologising when they are wrong. With regard to managers within the Authority, it appears that they must have the courage to talk about ethnic discrimination in police work, monitor the work involving checks, and take action when police officers behave badly or express themselves inappropriately.

### **Stop-and-search zones are not seen as an important tool among police officers**

Finally, the police officers in the study consider that the provisions of the Swedish Code of Criminal Procedure and the Swedish Police Act provide

good opportunities to carry out checks on those individuals whom they suspect of drug offences. As a result, relatively few police officers believe that stop-and-search zones would be an important tool for the police in their work to combat crime. On the contrary, several officers argue that there are many risks associated with the introduction of stop-and-search zones – in the worst case, they can be counterproductive. This is because, on the one hand, police officers believe that they can already check whoever they want and, on the other hand, the introduction of stop-and-search zones could lead to more innocent people being checked. The exception is women, however, whom they say often slip under the police's radar.

Most of the police officers Brå spoke to are convinced that stop-and-search zones would mainly be relevant in vulnerable areas, where the police also work continuously to build trust among citizens. According to several officers, a stop-and-search zone in a vulnerable area therefore also risks eroding trust in the police and further reinforcing feelings of injustice and exclusion. Thus, giving the Swedish Police Authority the opportunity to introduce stop-and-search zones may be perceived as a neutral legislative change, but if in practice it only affects specific groups within society, it may instead have a discriminatory effect. Those who take a cautiously positive attitude towards stop-and-search zones argue that their introduction could have a cooling effect on gang conflicts and riots, for example.

### **Brå's assessment**

The results of this study show that the Swedish Police Authority faces several challenges. However, the report includes several proposals and good examples of how the Authority can work further to promote equal treatment and counteract discriminatory ethnic profiling. This work must be seen as an ongoing process that requires continuous monitoring. In the immediate future, Brå believes that the Authority can further develop its work by doing the following:

- At a strategic level, the Authority needs to draw up guidance or guidelines for police officers on patrol duty regarding what is expected of them in profiling work and in a check situation. As well as providing guidelines on how police officers should respond and act during a check, this document must also state what can be regarded as satisfactory documentation of the building blocks used in the profiling work, and how the Authority views the use of building blocks



such as clothing, gender, age and ethnicity.

- • In order to develop into a more mature organisation in the work with profiling and equal treatment, the Authority needs to deepen its knowledge of discrimination at all levels within the organisation. To get started with this work quickly, it may be appropriate to use the existing structures in RIV and the Mission Compass. Employees at both strategic and operational levels may also benefit from an implicit association test, which can show how unconscious stereotypes about different people can influence decision-making.
- • Greater awareness of how policing affects different groups within society may reduce the risk of discriminatory ethnic profiling. It would therefore benefit the Authority's development work to engage in regular dialogue with civil organisations, which have knowledge of discriminatory structures within society and how these affect individuals.
- • The Authority needs to continuously monitor police officers' work in terms of checks and accuracy broken down by ethnicity. The way ethnicity has been analysed in this report can serve as an example. To allow for monitoring and relevant comparisons between different areas, the police's documentation of checks and enforcement measures needs to be reliable and equivalent nationwide. There are also grounds for the Authority to consider whether it might be appropriate to introduce a system whereby police officers provide a digital receipt to those who are subject to body searches, regardless of the legal basis. The UK already has such a system, and statistics on police checks are published regularly on the government's website. This creates transparency and good conditions for discussing and explaining differences between areas and differences in terms of who is subject to enforcement measures by the police.