

# Antisemitic hate crime

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Summary of report 2019:4

**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, crime prevention work, and the justice system's reactions to crime, primarily to the Government and agencies within the criminal justice system.

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# Summary

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention has been instructed by the Government to conduct a study of antisemitic hate crime. The study was to investigate the character of antisemitic hate crime with a special focus on the perpetrators. The report from the study draws on both quantitative and qualitative data.

The quantitative presentations are based on two data sets. The first comprises 564 police reports relating to offences with an identified antisemitic motive that were included in the Swedish hate crime statistics for 2012–2016. The second comprises 103 court judgements relating to persons convicted of offences involving an antisemitic motive between January 2007 and May 2018.

The qualitative presentations are based on interviews and on the offence descriptions included in the police reports and the court judgements. The interview data are based on 22 informal and 70 formal, semi-structured interviews. Since it is not always self-evident where the line should be drawn between non-criminal expressions of contempt, disparaging comments, or threats that allude to a person's group affiliation, and what are to be regarded as hate crimes in the form of, e.g. molestation, unlawful threats, or agitation against an ethnic or national group, the National Council has chosen to study antisemitism on the basis of a broad perspective. Among other things, this means that interview subjects have been asked to describe their experiences of exposure to antisemitism in general, rather than their exposure to antisemitic hate crime. The purpose of the report is to improve the knowledge on antisemitism and antisemitic hate crime in Sweden. It is also hoped that the study will contribute to an

improved understanding of those individuals and institutions that are exposed to violations and offences of this kind.

## **Expressions of antisemitism found in many different contexts**

Police reports, court judgements, and interviews show that expressions of antisemitism occur in a range of different environments and contexts – in public places, in schools, in workplaces, in the home, at Jewish institutions, and on the Internet. As a result, there are few places where members of the Jewish community can be free of feelings of fear or concern about exposure to antisemitism. Antisemitism is expressed in face-to-face meetings, by telephone, in letters, and in social media. The seriousness of the expressions taken by antisemitism varies, from disparaging jokes and offensive descriptions of Jews, to threats and physical violence. The National Council’s interviews indicate that Jews who are open about their Jewish identity or who hold public positions are at greater risk of victimisation, since they are easier to identify as Jewish. Exposure to antisemitism also often includes repeated experiences of victimisation. No major gender-based differences were found in the types of victimisation experienced: women, men, girls, and boys are all exposed to various types of antisemitic abuse, threats, and violence. However, the National Council’s data show that there are gender-based differences in the *content* of expressions of antisemitism. This is primarily seen in the way women are exposed to sexualised threats and abuse, with epithets such as “Jew whore” and threats of rape.

## **Antisemitic hate crimes draw on a range of intermingled ideologies and opinions**

The National Council’s data show that the perpetrators of antisemitic hate crime are primarily men, but that offences are committed by both men and women from a wide age range. The perpetrators come from different types of backgrounds, and by no means all of them are affiliated with organised groups. Antisemitism is thus found within many different parts of the population and cuts across different religions, secular groups, political positions, and ideologies. At the same time, antisemitism constitutes an important part of the ideological foundations of radical nationalist and violent jihadist groups.

The National Council’s study shows that radical nationalism constitutes a threat to both individuals and to Jewish institutions. A number of the Council’s interview subjects have noted

increased activity in the radical nationalist milieu in recent years, for example in the form of public political activities. In addition to organising large-scale events such as demonstrations, these groups commit offences in the form of harassment and threats, the purpose of which, according to the interview subjects, is to force Jewish people to leave their positions or close down their associations. A number of the interview subjects who hold more or less public positions described how their prominent roles have led to their being singled out for victimisation by radical nationalist groups.

While radical nationalism constituted the most clearly distinguishable ideological milieu in the National Council's data, a number of interview subjects who work to ensure the security of Jewish institutions described the violent jihadist milieu as posing the most severe threat to these institutions. This threat is considered serious, since violent jihadist groups view Jewish institutions as legitimate targets for terrorist attacks, and according to the National Council's interview subjects, an increasing number of antisemitic attacks around the world are being committed by persons with ties to this type of milieu. The fact that Jewish institutions have been the targets of terrorism in other countries has thus contributed to an increased sense of insecurity in the Jewish community in Sweden.

The National Council's interviews show that antisemitism also exists across the political spectrum in Sweden, from left to right. A number of the Council's interview subjects referred to public statements by local politicians and Members of Parliament from different political parties, who have linked Swedish Jewish institutions and their representatives to criticism of Israel or who have questioned the "Swedishness" of Swedes of Jewish background. A number of interview subjects also described experiences of antisemitic attitudes and prejudices expressed by individuals who are active in anti-racist and leftist political movements, often linked to opinions on the Israel/Palestine conflict.

A number of the National Council's interview subjects described experiences of exposure to threats, violence, and molestation by persons of Middle Eastern background. At the same time, interview subjects also pointed out that those parts of the Swedish population with origins in the Middle East comprise a broad range of different population groups and that, as in other parts of the population, there are significant variations in the way antisemitism is viewed within these groups.

A number of the interview subjects also described being exposed to antisemitic jokes, prejudices, and stereotyped comments, as well as threats, violence, and molestation, by persons whom they describe as “ethnic Swedes”, and whom they do not perceive as belonging to any specific group or ideological milieu. Teachers and others who work in schools described students, irrespective of background, making Nazi salutes, telling disparaging jokes about Jews, and using the word “Jew” to describe people perceived as miserly, greedy, or dictatorial. A number of interview subjects also described having been exposed to antisemitism from supervisors and colleagues at their workplaces.

The National Council’s data do not provide a basis for conclusions about how much antisemitism can be traced to specific groups or environments. The Council’s interviews indicate that the interview subjects’ experiences of the perpetrators of antisemitic hate crime incidents vary depending on where in Sweden the subjects live and the spheres in which they are active. Persons who move in organised political circles have more frequently experienced antisemitism among individuals with links to various political parties. Persons from parts of the country where radical nationalist organisations are more active have more frequently experienced antisemitic incidents committed by persons with links to groups of this kind. Persons who live in metropolitan areas with a relatively large number of residents from different countries in the Middle East have more frequently experienced antisemitic incidents committed by persons with a background in these countries. Interview subjects from all parts of the country covered by the National Council’s sample also described experiences of expressions of antisemitism from individuals who could be “just about anyone”.

The National Council’s interviews also show that although there are various differences between the environments and groups in which antisemitism is expressed, these environments nonetheless appear to share the same stereotyped conceptions about Jews to a significant extent.

### **Similarities in the antisemitic language used by perpetrators from different groups**

The interview data show that conspiracy theories and antisemitic conceptions regarding e.g. Jewish power are to be found in many parts of the population. The language used to express antisemitism also appears to be similar irrespective of the gender, age, or group affiliation of the perpetrators. This language

includes both so-called modern or political antisemitism which has its roots in racial ideologies, and so-called new antisemitism, which often involves expressions of antisemitism that appear to be activated by the Israel/Palestine conflict. There are also examples of so-called “everyday antisemitism”, which includes sarcastic comments and the offensive stereotyping of Jews in everyday situations.

A number of the National Council’s interview subjects felt that the antisemitic rhetoric in Sweden has become more offensive and that it has become increasingly characterised by the use of coded language, or “dog whistles”, which are not always perceived as antisemitic by those who are unfamiliar with the new antisemitic language usage. Commonly used code words for Jews in Sweden include, for example, *Abraham’s children*, *Illuminati*, *The Eternal*, *Cultural Marxists*, *Cosmopolitans*, *Globalists* and *You know who*. This type of antisemitic rhetoric is also often linked to visual cues, for example by means of the use of Internet memes.

### **Exposure to antisemitism leads to feelings of insecurity and restrictions on everyday life**

Many of the National Council’s interview subjects are concerned about the development of antisemitism in Sweden. The fear they describe is in part due to having been directly exposed to antisemitic hate crime, and in part due to worries about being exposed to hate crime in the future. At the individual level, the consequences of antisemitism may manifest themselves in different ways for different people. It is also important to bear in mind that the National Council’s interview data cannot be said to be representative, i.e. we cannot conclude that all Jews in Sweden experience the consequences described in the report. However, the interview material nonetheless contains a number of themes which illustrate the ways in which antisemitism affects the lives of Jewish people in Sweden.

One prominent theme in the interviews was that antisemitic hate crime creates both acute anxiety and a recurring sense of insecurity and worry in everyday life. In part this involves a sense of insecurity due to incidents that the interview subjects have experienced personally, or that have been experienced by friends and acquaintances. In part there is a sense of insecurity that is activated by news of serious antisemitic crimes in other countries.

In addition, there is also a parallel concern that family members, friends, or acquaintances will be victimised. Many describe having developed an everyday security-consciousness in order to minimise the risk of becoming victimised – which also restricts individuals' freedom of action. As has already been mentioned, the interview data indicate that Jewish people who are more open about their Jewish identity are at greater risk of exposure to hate crime. Differences in exposure to victimisation may thus be a result of the person being a public person or wearing religious clothing or Jewish symbols. Many of the National Council's interview subjects also described that experiences of exposure to crime, as well as the fear of exposure to crime, have led to their choosing to conceal their Jewish identity, either completely or in certain situations.

According to the National Council's interviews, some Jewish schoolchildren choose not to reveal their Jewish identity at school as a result of antisemitism. Online antisemitism has also led some interview subjects to consider terminating their social media activity.

A number of the interview subjects spoke of friends or acquaintances who were considering moving away from their home towns, or in some cases from Sweden, as a result of antisemitism. According to the National Council's interview subjects, these people felt that it would not be possible to live in safety as Jews in Sweden in the future. Although the National Council's interviews show that some Jewish people are considering leaving Sweden or choosing to conceal their identity due to fears of being exposed to antisemitism, however, the National Council's interview subjects also expressed resistance about doing so. For example, several interview subjects described that they sometimes choose to wear Jewish symbols despite the fact that they do not always feel safe doing so.

## **Jewish institutions have to increase levels of security**

The interview subjects who work at Jewish institutions or associations described that security measures have increased successively in line with a perceived normalisation of antisemitism in Swedish society. The need for extensive security measures is described as a dilemma. On the one hand, these measures are appreciated since they contribute to a sense of safety. On the other hand, they place restrictions on the openness of Jewish institutions, because it becomes more complicated to visit them and to participate in organised events. Representatives

of Jewish congregations and associations described that a significant amount of their organisational funds had to be devoted to security measures.

## **Society's response to antisemitic hate crime insufficient**

According to the National Council's interview subjects, Swedish society needs to communicate its condemnation of antisemitism more clearly. Interview subjects described experiencing a lack of confidence in local communities, in the police and the criminal justice system as a whole, and in politicians, as a result of the lack of a clear response to a perceived normalisation of antisemitic rhetoric in Swedish society. Two specific actors were mentioned repeatedly in the National Council's interviews as having a particularly important role to play in relation to antisemitism: schools and the police. Several interview subjects described a perception that some teachers lack the ability to deal with antisemitism at school, and that they sometimes choose not to confront students who express antisemitic attitudes and behaviours.

The National Council's interviews show that people of Jewish background often choose not to report exposure to antisemitic hate crimes to the police because they perceive the reporting process as difficult, complex or tiresome. A number of the National Council's interview subjects also noted that police reports of antisemitic hate crime seldom result in convictions, and said that reporting offences to the police might therefore be viewed as a waste of time. Among those who stated that they do report antisemitic incidents to the police, many said that the primary reason for doing so was to contribute to improving the statistics on antisemitic hate crime in Sweden.

Interview subjects also expressed uncertainty about whether the police would turn up at Jewish sites and institutions if they were needed. Although interview subjects described communications between Jewish institutions and the police in positive terms, there was also a perception that in the final analysis, it is the Jewish institutions themselves that have to bear the responsibility for their own security. Individuals working at Jewish institutions also felt that the police do not provide them with a clear assessment of the nature of the existing threat against Jewish institutions, and that the Swedish police take less responsibility

for the security of Jewish institutions than their counterparts in other European countries.

### **Strategic areas for further action**

The Government's instruction to the National Council has not included describing existing measures to prevent antisemitic hate crime or making concrete proposals for further preventive measures. At the same time, the report is intended to provide an improved knowledge base that may contribute to furthering the work to prevent antisemitism.

In addition to presenting the results of the National Council's study, which have been described in brief in this summary, the report therefore also describes a number of preventive measures discussed by the National Council's interview subjects in the light of the Government's action plan, the National Plan to Combat Racism, Similar Forms of Hostility, and Hate Crime, from 2016. Stated briefly, there are considerable similarities between the Government's action plan and the areas that interview subjects felt were in need of improvement, particularly with respect to improving the knowledge on antisemitism among both school and police employees, and continuing to work for a more active criminal justice system.

What forms does antisemitic hate crime take in Sweden, and who commits these offences? These are the two central questions examined by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention in this report.

Antisemitic hate crimes are offences that are based on feelings such as fear or hatred of, or hostility towards, Jews and Judaism. The offences can be directed against individuals who are Jewish, or who are perceived to be Jewish, as well as against Jewish institutions and Jewish property. The report describes the nature of these offences, the perpetrators, and the consequences that the offences have for the victims, on the basis of police reports, court judgements, and interviews.

The study is directed primarily to the Swedish Government, but also to actors in the criminal justice system and others with an interest in the subject.

