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Threats and violence

A report on the victimization of occupational groups important to a democratic society

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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 by producing data and disseminating knowledge on crime and crime prevention work and the justice system's responses to crime.

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Summary

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) has been commissioned by the Government to conduct a review of the research regarding threats, violence, harassment and attempted corruption against individuals performing services, or employed in positions, of particular importance to our democratic society. These groups include politicians, journalists, opinion-leaders, employees of the justice system, and certain employees in other state agencies as well as municipalities and county councils. Earlier studies regarding some of these occupational groups have shown that the exposure to threats and violence is significant, which can have negative consequences for democracy. The Government therefore wishes to obtain an overall understanding: which groups have been studied, which of these groups is most exposed to threats and violence, and where is the need for new knowledge greatest?

The Government's commission also included looking at exposure to threats and violence in the various occupations independently, examining which parties are reported to be the perpetrators, the consequences for the persons exposed, and the experiences garnered from protection and support measures.

In the report, we have looked at existing studies in order to compile a review of the research regarding threats and violence against the relevant occupations. The studies, however, measure different things, have different statistical periods, apply different definitions of threats and violence, and have been carried out in different ways. It is therefore impossible to make any exact comparisons between them. It is possible, however, to provide an overall impression of general patterns and differences between the occupational groups.

Few studies regarding threats and violence against the groups studied

There are relatively few studies regarding threats and violence against the occupational groups covered by our report. We have looked for studies regarding threats and violence against journalists, opinion-leaders, politicians, employees of 121 governmental agencies in the justice system, employees of an additional 71 state agencies, and a number of occupations in municipalities and county councils. In total, we have found 20 Swedish studies of a satisfactory quality.

There are very few such studies regarding occupational groups within the State, county councils and municipalities. There are only a few studies regarding journalists and we have not found any study at all regarding opinion-leaders. The group that has been studied most is politicians. Many of the occupations within the justice system have also been studied, however, primarily in a single study which included different occupations. To obtain a clear impression of the exposure, the perpetrators, the consequences of exposure, and protective and support measures, more studies are required for almost all of the occupational groups and government agencies.¹

¹ However, it can be pointed out here that in 2015, Brå is carrying out a major study of undue influence in the form of, among other things, threats and violence against several of the occupational groups in the justice system and within various governmental agencies.

Employees in the health and social care fields are most affected by threats and violence

In order to place the exposure of the relevant occupational groups in a single context, we also shed light on the reported exposure to threats and violence in the working population as a whole. This exposure varies between various studies and contexts. When job-related threats and violence are viewed as a working environment problem, approximately 14 percent report that they have been exposed (Swedish Work Environment Authority 2014:3). However, when asked about exposure to threats and violence as criminal acts, approximately 3 percent instead respond that they had been exposed to these (SCB 2014, Brå 2015:1).

The reported exposure to threats and violence in the general population has remained relatively stable over recent years. Women are more exposed than men, probably because women work in many particularly exposed occupations, for example in health care and social work. These two occupational groups (individuals who work in health care and social work) are most often exposed to threats and violence at work.

If one looks at government employees as a group, they appear to be more exposed to threats and violence than the working population as a whole. Individuals engaged in the exercise of governmental authority are reported to be particularly exposed.

High degree of exposure among “democracy workers”

The percent of individuals exposed to threats and violence in the occupational groups in our overview appears to be higher for some groups and lower for others. When compared to the average for the working population (14 percent²), some of the groups wind up above this figure, some around 14 percent, and a few groups far below it. As mentioned above, it is difficult to compare different studies directly, due to the differences in how they were carried out.

One important factor which distinguishes the studies from each other is whether they study “undue influence”.

For almost all occupational groups where undue influence was not what was being studied, the rate of exposure is between 25 percent and 60 percent. Consequently, these studies are focused on a very high level of exposure to threats and violence at work.

If one looks instead at the studies involving undue influence, the level of exposure is between 11 percent and 20 percent for almost all occupational groups. These studies cover, among others, judges, customs officials, Coast Guard officials, and employees of the National Public Insurance Office.

Undue influence means that the threat and the violence must be *aimed at influencing* the exercise of public authority. Consequently, the level of exposure would probably have been higher for Coast Guard officials, customs officials and several other occupational groups if general threats and violence at work had been studied instead of undue influence. The composite picture is thus that almost all of the relevant occupational groups for which there are studies are more exposed to threats and violence than the working population as a whole. The exception is lay judges and employees of the Swedish

² As set forth above, there are various statistics for the level of exposure in the working population as a whole. We include here the highest figure in order to shed light on the fact that the level of exposure in the occupational groups we are studying is high even compared with this.

Tax Agency and the county councils, where the level of exposure to threats and violence is considered to be the same as, or lower than, that of the working population.

Members of Parliament and police officers: two very exposed groups

The following occupational groups are those which report more than any other (of those for which we have found studies) that they have been exposed to threats and violence.³ The following list indicates the percentage of persons exposed to threats, violence, harassment or similar acts over the course of one year or 1.5 years (unless otherwise stated).

- Members of Parliament and county council politicians (59 percent and 25 percent respectively)
- Food inspectors (45 percent, exposed at some time)
- Police officers (41 percent)
- Social workers (30 percent)
- Employees of the prisons and probation service (26 percent)
- Prosecutors (25 percent)
- Employees of the Debt Enforcement Authority (20 percent).

Threats and harassment are reported to be significantly more common than violence. Police officers comprise the occupational group in which the employees most frequently report that they have been exposed to violence. One of three police officers reports having been a victim of violence at work over the past 12 months (SCB 2013b).

Certain occupational groups are more commonly exposed to harassment while other groups are more often exposed to threats. Persons working “closely” to various types of risk clients in exposed situations are, as a rule, very exposed. This involves police officers, employees of the prisons and probation service and social workers. These groups are often exposed to threats and sometimes even violence.

Other groups are more exposed to harassment specifically, among others, prosecutors and judges who are not in the same close contact with clients, but who make crucial decisions for individuals.

Other exposed groups are food inspectors and also inspectors at county councils. Their works include elements of inspection and licensing and, as is the case with many of the groups in the list above, they often make sensitive decisions.

There are no major gender differences in terms of exposure to threats and violence. This is true of most of the occupational groups in the overview, although there are a few exceptions. In the prisons and probation service, for example, men are more exposed to threats and violence than women.

³ For food inspectors, police officers and social workers, the question is one of exposure to threats and violence – harassment is not included. There are also other differences between the various occupational groups.

How threats are made depends on the occupation – but harassment occurs most often over the telephone

How the threat is made appears to depend on how the various occupational groups communicate with their clients and the public. In the occupational groups we have studied, threats are most commonly made face-to-face. This may, for example, involve a spontaneous threat which is shouted in frustration. Such types of threats are common in occupational groups which often meet clients and the general public face-to-face, for example police officers and customs officials.

For journalists and politicians, threats are commonly made via the Internet⁴. These groups do not meet personally with clients as often and they are often active on the Internet.

With respect to how the harassment is taken place, the nature of the occupation appears to play less of a role than is the case with threats. The most common feature for almost all occupational groups is that the harassment consists of unpleasant telephone conversations.

It is unusual for the occupational groups in our study to have been exposed to violence, but in those cases where it does occur it is reported to involve less serious violence, for example a shove or a light blow. Most of the victims do not require medical care as a result of the violence. Police officers are the victims of serious violence more often which is probably due to the nature of police work. A relatively large percentage of police officers (one in five) took sick leave as a consequence of violence.

The perpetrators are often perceived to be psychologically unstable

The perpetrators of threats and violence against the occupational groups in our study are reported most often to be individuals acting alone and not representatives of groups. The most common category is persons who, in some way, are perceived to be psychologically unstable. Persons who are perceived to be in a desperate situation are also reported to be common perpetrators of threats and violence.

However, the type of perpetrator depends on the victim's occupation and the people he or she meets. For example, Coast Guard officials are often exposed to threats of violence by fishermen, customs officials by smugglers, and police officers often by substance abusers.

In the case of police officers, customs officials, and employees of the prisons and probation service, it is relatively common that the perpetrator can be linked to organized crime; this is unusual for the other occupational groups covered by this overview. It is also uncommon for the perpetrator to be a member of any type of extremist group, even if politicians and journalists are exposed to such perpetrators somewhat more often than other groups.

⁴ This is according to more recent studies. According to a few older studies regarding politicians, it was not as common for the Internet to be used to make the threat. This is probably due to the fact that Internet usage has increased since the older studies were carried out.

Threats, violence and harassment often arise in the heat of the moment in conjunction with negative decisions and similar actions. The perpetrators are often motivated in these cases by frustration or anger. However, the motives are perceived to be different for different occupational groups.

It is common that the perpetrator is believed to have the goal of influencing the exercise of the victim's occupation. This also applies to more spontaneous outbursts. Such actions may, for example, include the perpetrator screaming things like "I'll kill you if you don't change your decision".

Thoughts of changing jobs due to threats of violence are common

Threats and violence can affect the victim's work and his or her personal situation at work. If one looks at the personal situation, consequences as serious as sick leave due to threats and violence are very unusual⁵. On the other hand, thoughts about changing work, particularly following harassment and violence, are relatively common. One-fourth of the employees of the justice system who were exposed to harassment had considered changing work or quitting their jobs (Brå 2005:18).

We also looked at the effects of threats and violence on the victims' work. It is quite common for a victim to hesitate before performing various duties as a consequence of threats and violence. In several occupational groups, this involves approximately one-fifth of the victims.

On occasion, the victim will remain passive in various situations. Many times, such behaviour is entirely reasonable and legitimate. It might involve, for example, exercising extra caution in a risky situation or passing a sensitive matter on to a colleague.

However, on occasion, employees may allow threats and violence to affect their work in such a way that they themselves experience that their exercise of their occupation might be called into question. Just under 10 percent of the victims in the justice system report that this has happened to them⁶ (Brå 2005:18).

Reporting to the police varies depending on the occupational group

Most victims report threats and violence to their immediate superior or a similar person. This is true of almost all categories of occupations where this has been studied. Filing a police report is not as common. In most categories of occupations where the willingness to report has been studied, only approximately one-fifth file a police report. However, filing a police report is more common in those categories of occupations involved directly in the legal process – police officers, prosecutors and judges. In those groups, approximately one-half of the cases are reported to the police.⁷

It is more common to report violence than threats, and more common to report threats than harassment. This applies both to internal reports as well as police reports. This is true despite the fact that many respondents state that the harassment affected them negatively in various ways.

⁵ An exception to this is police officers where one in five has taken sick leave due to violence (Brå 2005:18).

⁶ This involves undue influence in the form of threats and violence.

⁷ This applies to threats and violence in the form of undue influence, which may involve more serious acts than threats and violence generally.

A common reason for not reporting threats and violence (internally or externally) is that the victim does not perceive the incident to be sufficiently serious. Many of those who do not report to their superior or to the police also state that a reason for not doing so is that the report seldom leads anywhere.

For politicians and journalists, complaints to the police also did not lead to any results in most cases. It was more common for a police report to lead to prosecution and legal sanctions in cases involving individuals working in the justice system. However, this result may be due to differences in how various studies were structured and carried out.

Different groups appear to have different access to protection and support

Protection, support and preventive measures have not been studied for all occupations. In those occupations where this has been studied, most of the individuals exposed to threats and violence report that they do not need protection or support. At the same time, the results show that, for certain occupations, there is said to be an attitude along the lines of “you have to be able to put up with some” threats and harassment. This is true, among others, of politicians, customs officials and police officers. This type of attitude may affect the extent to which protection and support is sought and to which threats and violence are reported.

Many of the politicians and journalists who need support do not receive it. For politicians, the figure is two-thirds (Brå 2014:9).

Journalists and local politicians are also two categories in which few individuals report that they receive training from their employer regarding threats and violence. Members of Parliament (who constitute a very exposed group) report, however, that they receive a great deal of information regarding threats and violence. In this group, a significantly greater percentage as compared with local politicians also report that they are aware of action plans in respect of threats and violence and who is responsible for security.

For social workers and employees of county councils and the National Public Insurance Office, the results show that many are satisfied with the support and help they have received from their employer.

Politicians and journalists are reported to be very exposed

Politicians and journalists have a great deal in common with respect to exposure to threats and violence. One in five politicians⁸ reports having been exposed to threats and violence⁹ over the past 12 months (Brå 2014:9). Among journalists, one in three reports having been exposed to threats over the past 12 months (Löfgren Nilsson 2011). The level of exposure is even higher in certain subcategories of the occupations.¹⁰ But it is not just the levels of exposure which are remarkable with respect to politicians and journalists. These occupations are also different in that they appear to be particularly exposed in an unusually large number of respects:

⁸ This applies when all of the three groups of politicians studied, members of parliament, members of county councils and members of municipal councils, are taken as a whole. However, members of parliament are significantly more exposed than the other groups – almost 60 percent have been exposed to some incident over the past year.

⁹ In the study by Brå, this is defined as “offenses or similar incidents”, and most of the incidents are threats and harassment (Brå 2014:9).

¹⁰ Among members of parliament, for example, almost 60 percent report that they have been exposed to threats and violence, and among tabloid journalists the level of exposure is 71 percent (Brå 2014:9; Löfgren Nilsson 2013).

- High level of exposure to threats and violence
- Influence is common
- Few report to the police
- Among those who do report, few state that the police report led anywhere
- Among those needing support, few receive it
- The preventive work is reported to be insufficient.

Some of the items above can be explained by how the studies regarding politicians and journalists were carried out.¹¹ However, taken as a whole, politicians and journalists appear to be exposed groups – particularly in the process after an incident has taken place. The routines and training regarding threats and violence among employers in these categories do not appear to be as good as those of state employers and justice system employers.

Exposure to attempted corruption varies, but it is the less serious cases that are reported

We have only found four studies which, to any greater degree, address attempted corruption. These deal with food inspectors, employees of the justice system, politicians, and senior officials in municipalities and county councils. The vast majority of attempted corruption reported in these studies involved less serious cases, for example gifts in the form of meals, bargain purchases, and corruption involving favouritism of friends, although there are more serious cases. It may be difficult, however, to get an overview of such serious cases of attempted corruption– not all of the people exposed to this wish to report it in surveys and interviews.

Among politicians and several categories of occupations in the justice system, very few are reported to have experienced attempted corruption. The groups in the justice system where exposure is the greatest are customs officials and Coast Guard officials. Among food inspectors and even animal welfare inspectors and environmental and health inspectors, the level of exposure to undue influence appears to be relatively high. One in three food inspectors has been exposed to “undue influence” (Horn af Rantzien 2014). These groups are also exposed to undue influence from internal sources, for example from politicians.

Brå’s assessment

The purpose of this report is to provide a picture of threats and violence against occupational groups of particular importance to a democratic society. These include, among others, politicians, journalists and government employees.

We have proceeded upon the basis of some 20 major studies in order to gain insight into the exposure of these occupational groups to threats and violence. One problem when working with existing studies is that different studies have been conducted differently. The differences with respect to, among other things, the period of time covered by the statistics and the definitions of threats and violence make exact comparisons of the results of different studies impossible.

¹¹ The definitions of threats and violence in these studies were broader than in certain other studies.

One of the most important demarcation lines in the overview runs between studies which look at threats and violence generally and studies which deal with threats and violence in the form of undue influence. The studies regarding undue influence deal with threats and violence which are specifically intended to influence the exercise of official duties. In such studies, one identifies the type of threats and violence which, perhaps, have the greatest impact on democracy.

Studies regarding general threats and violence are also important. Incidents which are not intended to influence the exercise of official duties may also have a negative impact on the well-being of people and the exercise of their official duties. For example, a victim may become more cautious when performing work or may consider seeking other employment.

Both of these types of influence are problematic for democracy. It is bad for democracy when people do not want to work in important occupations because threats and violence make them uneasy.

Future studies

It is important to continue to study exposure to threats and violence – both threats and violence generally, and threats and violence in the form of undue influence. We have attempted to determine both groups for which more information is needed and the type of information which is generally needed.

Our selection of categories of occupations with particular importance to democracy included over 200 different occupational groups and governmental authorities. There are no studies for the vast majority of these, and follow-up studies are needed for the occupational groups which have been studied. However, it is difficult to assess which occupational groups are most appropriate to study – for most occupational groups we have no information at all regarding exposure to threats and violence.

Based upon the risk factors which we have collected for the occupations, an assessment can, however, be made of the occupational groups and governmental authorities which should be studied in the future.

Factors which appeared to affect the existence of threats and violence at work:

- ***Which*** persons the occupational groups come in contact with

- the extent to which the occupational groups meet with risk clients, for example psychologically ill or desperate people

- the extent to which the occupational groups are exposed in the media/on the Internet

- ***How*** the occupational groups come in contact with clients/the public

- the extent to which situations in which meetings occur are felt to be desperate or frustrating for the clients

- the extent to which the individuals in the occupational groups communicate sensitive decisions or subjects, for example supervision decisions, individual decisions, or controversial political views.

With respect to attempted corruption, we have identified some occupations and industries which appear to be particularly exposed. These include senior officials in larger municipalities, environmental and health inspectors, food inspectors and animal welfare inspectors. Other groups which are reported to be exposed are employees of public agencies who work with the procurement of pharmaceuticals, transportation, construction, IT, medical technology, cleaning, and travel. It would be interesting to see more studies regarding these groups.

New study from Brå regarding undue influence

There is cause to mention here that Brå is now conducting (2015) a major study regarding undue influence in the form of, among other things, threats and violence. This study addresses undue influence on employees of 13 different government agencies and two unemployment benefits funds.¹² This study is not only analysing exposure broken down by public agency, as was the case in Brå's previous study of undue influence. This time, analyses are also being carried out based upon the function and work duties of the employee, which persons he or she meets, and how often he or she meets such persons. This is something which was often lacking in earlier studies, which is important to understand the various mechanisms underlying the threats and violence. In the new study, several different methods will be used in order to shed light on, and analyse, undue influence; these include surveys and interviews with people exposed to threats and violence.

Working together on studies based upon risk factors

When determining the areas for which more knowledge is generally required, the risk factors for threats and violence are a good starting point. Based on the list below, different types of risk clients, different types of physical circumstances, and so on can be studied. In this way, various public agencies and occupational groups can cooperate in the studies.

Factors which appear to increase the risk of exposure to threats and violence¹³

- The nature of the work (see the list above)
- The work environment generally
 - heavy workload, significant stress
 - insufficient work environment measures regarding threats and violence (for example, lack of training, guidelines, and other preventive work)
- Physical circumstances
 - poorly designed premises
 - no access to safety equipment
- Personal circumstances
 - new in the occupation
 - no training regarding threats and violence.

For all of the factors, it is important to study how they relate to exposure to threats and violence. Based upon the factors set forth above, it is also interesting to study which measures work best in combating threats and violence. For example, how are threats and violence aimed at younger and newly employed people best handled? What measures

¹² Specifically, the National Employment Office, the Swedish Economic Crime Authority, the National Public Insurance Office, IF Metall's unemployment fund, the Chancellor of Justice, the Swedish Prisons and Probation Service, the Debt Enforcement Authority, the Coast Guard, the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Police, the Swedish Tax Agency, ST's unemployment fund, the Swedish Courts, the Customs Agency and the Swedish Prosecution Authority.

¹³ The breakdown is based on information obtained in various contexts in various studies. It has not been determined that the risk factors apply to all occupational groups, situations, and perpetrators. The list must thus be viewed as a starting point for discussions regarding various risk factors, rather than an exact result.

work to prevent threats and violence when the perpetrators are psychologically ill? Studies regarding perpetrators believed to be psychologically unstable are of interest for almost all of the occupational groups in our selection – many are affected by this type of perpetrator.

When it comes to how threats and violence are communicated, more studies are needed regarding how to combat threats and harassment via social media, via comments to articles, and the other channels on the Internet.

‘What works’ can be included in future studies

One question in the Government commission was to what extent existing information regarding the various occupational groups can form the basis for concrete countermeasures on a local and national level. The studies we have found primarily deal with the exposure of individuals to threats and violence. If the goal is to draft concrete countermeasures based on research, more studies on two different levels are probably required. These are studies regarding the support, protection, and preventive measures which are available in the relevant organizations as well as studies regarding which measures actually work. The commission did not include looking at these aspects. However, our search for literature should have also found studies regarding measures – at least major studies of this type. According to the search results, there were not many major studies¹⁴ regarding measures against threats and violence in the organizations we studied. We found no research study which evaluated how well various measures (preventive, protective and/or supportive) work to combat threats and violence against the relevant occupational groups.¹⁵ However, there may be such research for other occupational groups – research which may also be relevant for the occupational groups we studied.

Few international studies and no studies regarding opinion-leaders

We have not found any studies regarding opinion-leaders and it is therefore difficult to comment on this group and on future studies of the group. However, since opinion-leaders can be exposed through media channels, there is cause to believe that they are exposed to threats and violence.

With respect to international studies, we have only conducted an overall review of the literature. We have found few studies there regarding the relevant occupational groups which can be used in the work against threats and violence in Sweden.

Advice to employers

When designing support, protection, and preventive measures, consideration should be given to the fact that different incidents are perceived as having different degrees of seriousness. We have broken down events into ‘less serious’, ‘serious’ and ‘very serious’ (see page 105).

Different types of events require different types of protection, support, and preventive measures. It is important that public authorities and other employers do not focus solely on the most serious events. Individuals may also be affected negatively by minor events – particularly where these occur repeatedly – but might hesitate in seeking out support since

¹⁴ However, the Swedish Agency for Public Management (2012a) and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2014) have conducted studies regarding this.

¹⁵ Although Brå’s handbook on combatting undue influence also contains examples of measures considered to be successful and which are aimed at known problems (2009).

they are afraid of not being taken seriously. The less serious events are also greater in number, and when many people are affected, the working environment may be affected negatively. It is therefore important that employers also have plans for how to handle and prevent less serious cases of threats and harassment. This may involve, for example, training for meetings with clients, information regarding support and help, communication of negative decisions, etc.

The list of risk factors is also useful at the workplace

The list of risk factors set forth above can also be used as a starting point for organizations wishing to draft strategies to prevent and handle threats and violence against their personnel. Examples of the issues may include: what are the types of risk clients and how should they be dealt with? Which types of situations do clients perceive as frustrating? How can we improve the design and safety equipment of the premises?

The list can also be used as a starting point for cooperation. Based on this list, it is possible to see on which points various organizations have common interests and are able to cooperate in combating threats and violence.

Harassment must be given attention

In several categories of occupations, harassment has a particularly negative impact on those exposed to it. Harassment – which can often recur over a longer period of time – may be debilitating for the persons exposed to it and may affect their wellbeing. Yet harassment is not reported as often as threats and violence, and harassment is sometimes not taken as seriously. It is also more common that cases of harassment reported to the police are dismissed (Brå 2005:18).

This may be due to the fact that harassment may be difficult to prove since it often involves ‘smaller’ and more subtle events as compared with threats of violence. However, it is important that employers take harassment as seriously as they do threats and violence.

Imperative to invest in continuing education

Different occupational groups maintain different levels of preparedness for threats and violence, depending on the nature of, and basic training for, the occupation. Police officers, for example, are often exposed to threats and violence but they also have certain authority and basic training which has equipped them for various incidents. For other exposed occupational groups, for example journalists, protection against threats and violence is not an obvious part of their basic education. It is particularly important that employers in such occupations provide continuing education regarding threats of violence.

For journalists, there are generally indications that employers need to work more with continuing education, support and protection. The same applies to politicians working in municipalities and county councils. These individuals may sometimes not have a clear employer and might ‘fall between the cracks’ between their party and the municipality or county council.

The employer can encourage its employees to tell and report

Local politicians and journalists are also groups which seldom report threats and violence to the police. They are not alone in this – in most occupational groups where the willingness to report has been studied, only approximately 20 percent report to the police. Employers can work here to increase this percentage.

Employers should also be attentive to workplace attitudes involving “you have to put up with a little” when it comes to threats and violence. Such attitudes are reported to be found within, among other groups, the police, customs, and politicians. However, these attitudes may be more pervasive – this subject is not addressed in many of the studies. The notion that a victim should have to ‘put up with’ threats or harassment may prevent people from telling about unpleasant incidents and working through them.