



Lethal violence in Sweden

1990–2017

Trends and characteristics

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Summary of report 2019:6

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

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Summary

Over the years, Brå has published a number of studies on lethal violence. This study describes the characteristics of lethal violence in Sweden today (2014–2017) and its development from the beginning of the 1990s. The study has collected data on all cases of lethal violence which occurred during the period 2014–2017. The data include preliminary investigations and, in cases with clearances, indictments and court judgements, pre-sentencing reports, and examinations conducted by forensic psychiatrists. The data were then analysed together with data that have previously been collected for the years 1990–2013.

An increase in recent years

After a long period during which the trend in lethal violence declined, the number of cases has increased somewhat during recent years. As used here, “number of cases” refers to the number of victims. The current level, which corresponds to approximately 1 case per 100,000 of population, is lower however than the level at the beginning of the 1990s, when the number of cases was approximately 1.3–1.4 per 100,000 of population. In a global perspective, Sweden has very low levels of lethal violence.

Lethal violence more common in large cities, often in disadvantaged areas

Most cases of lethal violence occur in the major metropolitan counties. In relation to the population, lethal violence is most common in Stockholm, with 1.4 cases per 100,000 of population, followed by Skåne, with 1.3 cases. The rate in Västra Götaland is 1.1 cases, and in the rest of the country, the rate is 0.7 cases per 100,000 of population.¹

¹ The average number of cases annually during the period 2014-2017.

A comparison of the trend over time shows that the decline since the beginning of the 1990s has primarily occurred in Stockholm.

The study also shows that lethal violence is more common in socially disadvantaged areas. In relation to the population, almost 3.5 times more lethal violence occurs in the areas that the Swedish Police have listed as disadvantaged. At the same time, it should be noted that such areas are relatively small and that the majority of lethal violence (83 per cent) occurs in the rest of the country.

Lethal violence against women and men occurs in different contexts

During the period 2014–2017, a total of 410 cases of lethal violence were committed in Sweden. In approximately one-quarter of these cases, the victim was a woman, while the victim was a man in approximately three-quarters. The study shows very clearly that lethal violence against women and lethal violence against men occur in different contexts. When women are the victims of lethal violence, the perpetrator is most commonly a current or former partner. Jealousy and separation are common motives. Lethal violence at the hands of other family members is also common when the victim is a woman. When men are victims of lethal violence, it is more common for one of the parties to be affiliated with the criminal milieu or for the violence to be the result of a dispute with a non-family member. These different contexts for lethal violence against women and men are reflected in consistent gender differences in several of the other results presented in the study. Female victims are generally older than male victims. Lethal violence against women most commonly takes place in the victim's own home, whereas in cases of lethal violence against men, the violence may also have occurred in the home of the perpetrator or of a third person. It is also more common for lethal violence against men to be committed in various outdoor public environments, for example on the street.

Knife violence is the most common method for lethal violence against both female and male victims. However, when the victim is a woman, strangulation, suffocation, and blunt force trauma are also relatively common. When the victim is a man, on the other hand, firearms are used almost as often as knives.

When compared with cases of lethal violence against men, it is more common for the perpetrators of lethal violence against women to suffer from mental health problems. When the victim is a woman, it is also more common for the perpetrator to commit, or attempt to commit, suicide.

Clear change in the characteristics of lethal violence over time

Apart from the differences in the types of lethal violence experienced by women and men respectively, the study shows a clear change in the characteristics of lethal violence over the studied period. Conflicts in the criminal milieu have become more common, particularly in recent years.

At the same time, violence between family members, has decreased, but nonetheless continues to account for almost as many deaths as violence committed in the context of conflicts in the criminal milieu.

The change in these different types of contexts is reflected throughout the various analyses of circumstances surrounding the offences. In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of cases in which the victim is a man. In terms of the age of the victim, there has also been a dramatic increase in the number of younger men. Although the most common crime scene continues to be a dwelling, there has been a clear decrease over time in the number of cases of lethal violence that have occurred in dwellings. Instead, there has been an increase in cases of lethal violence that have occurred in outdoor urban environments. Although knife violence remains the most common method of violence in respect of both female and male victims, the use of firearms in connection with lethal violence has doubled since the middle of the 2000s.

A reduction in the clearance rate in recent years

Most cases of lethal violence are cleared by the police, which usually means that the perpetrator is convicted of the offence. Although no legal proceedings are brought in cases in which the perpetrator has died, absconded abroad, or is under 15 years of age, these cases are nevertheless also counted as having been cleared. During the period 2014–2017, 68 percent of cases of lethal violence were cleared. The clearance rate varied between 75 and 90 per cent during the years 1990–2010, and thereafter decreased gradually. The decrease may be a result of the change in the characteristics of lethal violence described above, with an increase in cases of lethal violence in the criminal milieu, which are difficult to clear, but may also be part of a general trend towards a decrease in the clearance rate for most crime types that has been observed over the past several years. At the same time, the clearance rate for cases of lethal violence is significantly higher than for offences in general.

More severe penalties for murder

Since the beginning of the 1990s, an increasing number of cases of lethal violence have been classified as murder, while a decreasing number have been classified as manslaughter. The proportion of cases classified as assault resulting in death has also decreased over time.

Over recent years, the legislation has been amended on a number of occasions with the intention of increasing the use of life sentences in cases of murder. For a long time, the average prison sentence for murder was approximately 10 years, but since 2009 it has successively increased, to almost 15 years by the end of the studied period. The actual length of the prison term served in connection with a life sentence has also increased. Prison sentences for manslaughter and assault resulting in death have not changed notably during the studied period.

Different measures are required to prevent different types of lethal violence

Lethal violence is a very heterogeneous type of crime, with significant variations in the circumstances that characterise the offence. As discussed previously, lethal violence in families and conflicts in the criminal milieu comprise two major subcategories. Since the offences occur in such different contexts, it is clear that the prevention of lethal violence requires a range of different measures.

Lethal violence in the family in general, and in intimate relationships in particular, often occurs in the victim's own home, in the absence of eyewitnesses. It also takes longer for the offence to be discovered than in the case of other types of lethal violence. However, when the victim is a woman, there is often a prior history of threats and violence, and it is common for the perpetrator to have previously been in contact with the mental health system. This means that there are often signals that provide an opportunity for both the police and the healthcare system to take action before the situation finally results in lethal violence. There is much to indicate that there is significant room for improvement on the part of these actors with respect to the timely identification of risk.

On the other hand, conflicts in the criminal milieu often occur outdoors, eyewitnesses are more frequent, and the police can thus become aware of the offences more quickly, although the clearance rate is generally low. Preventing this type of lethal violence requires efforts in the neighbourhoods in which these conflicts arise. In addition to the police, these efforts need to include actors such as the social services, schools, and civil society. There is also a need for action to combat the illegal markets in narcotics and firearms.

Preventive efforts also need to be directed against other types of lethal

violence, such as the relatively large number of cases that can be linked to substance abuse and mental illness. Another example is politically motivated lethal violence which, although it currently accounts for only a small number of cases in Sweden, nonetheless causes significant damage to the public sense of safety.

The number of cases of lethal violence in Sweden is low in an international perspective. However, a marked increase over recent years in the level of gun violence in the criminal milieu has attracted attention and caused concern. At the same time, family-related cases of lethal violence account for a similar number of deaths. Smaller categories include, among others, politically-motivated lethal violence, lethal violence committed by individuals suffering from mental illness, and lethal violence in connection with sexual assault.

This study describes the characteristics of, and trends in, lethal violence during the period 1990–2017. Among other things, it shows that lethal violence against women and men takes place in completely different contexts, on the basis of different motives, and using different methods of violence. Young men from disadvantaged areas are over-represented among both victims and perpetrators.

Since lethal violence comprises many different types of incidents, different types of preventive measures are necessary. The final section of the report describes the work that is already underway in this area, and further steps that can be taken to prevent lethal violence.



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