

Quality of statistics regarding persons suspected of offences

A quality study of criminal statistics

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Quality study 3

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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Author: Roger Karlsson

Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, Box 1386, 111 93 Stockholm
Telephone 08-527 58 400, email info@bra.se, www.bra.se

Summary

In 2011, the Swedish Agency for Public Management reviewed the criminal statistics and concluded that the available statistics could be used to a greater extent for purposes of following up on the operations of the criminal justice system (Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2011). In its review, the Agency for Public Management also emphasised the importance of conducting systematic quality studies in order to evaluate and assess the quality of the statistics. As a result of the Agency for Public Management's review, Brå (The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention) conducted a user survey titled *Målgruppsanpassning av kriminalstatistiken* (Target group adaptation of criminal statistics) (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2013), which identified three primary areas of use:

- providing a statistical basis for insight into, review of, and follow-up on the operations of the criminal justice system;
- providing knowledge regarding individuals who come into contact with the criminal justice system;
- supplementing the Swedish Crime Survey (SCS) and other sources in analyses of levels of crime and criminal trends.

As a result of the Agency for Public Management's review, Brå also began to conduct quality studies in which input data is reviewed. Quality study 1 reviewed the use of crime codes in conjunction with the categorisation of offences, and quality study 2 reviewed the use of the Swedish Police's decision codes. The studies have shown the need to revise sections of the criminal statistics. The overarching suggestions are to render the criminal statistics more usable for operational follow-up, which is to be done by basing statistics on total populations and to strive for coherence between the statistical products. In addition, the segments which are used must be expected to maintain high quality and be produced with a high degree of reliability. The earlier statistical product titled *Uppklarade brott* (Cleared offences) was revised on the basis of these criteria and has now been replaced by the statistics regarding *Handlagda brott* (Processed offences).

There was also cause to review and revise the statistics regarding persons suspected of offences. The goal was to make the statistics more usable from an operational perspective by means of total reporting regarding persons suspected of offences. Earlier quality studies also indicated that the definition of a person suspected of an offence might be qualitatively insufficient.

This quality study answers two overarching questions:

- What does total reporting of persons suspected of offences entail, and how does this population differ from the population of persons suspected of offences who continue to be suspected of an offence following a completed investigation?
- Can the population of persons suspected of offences who continue to be suspected of an offence following a completed investigation be produced with sufficient quality?

The questions in the study have been answered by generating statistics from Brå's operational database (*VDB*) for the years 2004–2014. Statistics have been generated for both the total population of persons suspected of offences and the population of persons suspected of offences who continue to be suspected of an offence following a completed investigation. The statistics have been compared in respect of level, trends, and have been disaggregated by the variables of gender, age, and category of offence. Statistics have also been generated regarding various types of decisions regarding suspected offences¹ and the agency taking the decision.

¹ A suspicion of an offence is a suspicion regarding an individual's participation in a criminal act. If a person is suspected of multiple offences, a suspected offence is established for each offence of which the individual is suspected.

Statistics regarding persons suspected of offences – structure and prerequisites

Persons suspected of offences where the suspicion of crime remains are defined as follows:

An individual who the police, the customs authority, or the prosecution service suspect of having committed an offence, with the lowest level of suspicion being suspected on reasonable grounds, and where a decision was taken during the reporting year, meaning that the person continues to be suspected of having committed an offence.

The definition entails that what is presented is in respect of a subpopulation of all persons suspected of offences.

The statistics are based on information from the Swedish Police's and the Swedish Prosecution Authority's respective case management systems. Structured information from the investigative authorities' decision-making structures is used to determine whether a person continues to be suspected of an offence after a decision is taken. In 2013, the Swedish Police changed to a decision-making structure that was consistent with that of the Swedish Prosecution Authority, which has had a noticeable impact on the quantity of information that Brå receives regarding processing of suspicions of offences. The change of decision-making structure means that it became possible for the Swedish Police to register decisions in greater detail.

Consequences of a transition to a total population

A total accounting of persons suspected of offences leads to an average of 178,000 persons suspected of offences per year during the period 2004–2014, which is an increase in level by an average of 64,000 suspected persons per year, or 57 percent. Although the difference in level between the two populations is relatively large, the trend over time for both populations is relatively similar. The total population, however, increased somewhat more between 2004 and 2014, by a total of 13 percent, compared with a 4 percent increase for persons suspected of offences where the suspicion of crime remains. As a result, the percentage of registered persons suspected of offences among the total population decreased from 66 percent in 2004 to 60 percent in 2014.

When the result is broken down by processing authority, it can be seen that the operationalisation of decisions by the police has affected the level, and perhaps also the development, of the number of persons who continue to be suspected of an offence. This has become discernible as a result of the change of the Police's decision-making structure in 2013. The development in respect of persons suspected of offences in the group 15–17 years of age has been particularly affected; this is a result of a shift of responsibility for these suspicions of an offence from the Swedish Prosecution Authority to the Swedish Police in 2012.

In respect of the disaggregation by gender and age, there are no major changes when the statistics regarding the total population are generated. A somewhat greater percentage of women are reported, which is consistent with which decisions are taken regarding suspicions of an offence for each gender. A greater difference can be seen for breakdown by the category of offence. There, it becomes clearer that the varying percentages in different categories have been included in the statistics where the person continues to be suspected of an offence. Categories where a greater percentage is included are the Road Traffic Offences Act and the Narcotics Act, with 79 and 68 percent, respectively, of all suspicions of an offence in 2014. A category where a smaller percentage is included are offences against the person (Chapters 3–7 of the Swedish Penal Code), where 40 percent of all suspicions of an offence were included in 2014.

Definition of a person suspected of an offence

The definition which delimits the population of persons suspected of offences in the statistics has been reviewed on the basis of Statistics Sweden's (SCB) quality components of relevance, reliability and coherence.

Based on the study conducted in respect of the users' needs for information regarding, above all, statistics adapted to the operation, the definition cannot be seen as relevant. Instead of a volume for the operations, the definition identifies a population where the suspicion of an offence could not be dismissed - a kind of attempt to exclude individuals who are found to be not guilty of an offence. This population can, indeed, be interesting from other perspectives. However, there are other populations, such as suspected persons with a prosecution decision, which are very close to persons suspected of an offence where the suspicion of crime remains, and which is a more operational population.

The population of persons suspected of offences where the suspicion of crime remains can be criticised on the grounds of reliability. It is clear that the Police's former decision-making structure (which was used until 2012), could not be operationalised on the basis of the definition and that this affected the level, and probably also the development, of the statistics. Even with new and better conditions, by means of more detailed so-called investigation and prosecution decisions (*Sw. UoL-besluten*), it is doubtful whether the definition can be operationalised with sufficient reliability. This is due to, among other things, the fact that the decision-making structure is not, in fact, intended to determine whether a person continues to be suspected of an offence.

Finally, it can also be stated that the definition is not used in other statistical products within crime statistics, which reduces coherence.

Brå's assessment

In order to render the statistics of suspected offences more usable from an operational perspective, it is recommended that all persons suspected of offences as well as all processed suspicions of having committed an offence be reported. In conjunction with the revision, it is also proposed that the statistical products be divided into two separate products.

Based on the results of the quality study, it is also recommended that Brå cease producing statistics regarding the population of persons suspected of offences who continue to be suspected of having committed an offence. Instead, it is proposed that individuals with a prosecution decision be reported; this population is more closely tied to operations and thus more relevant to explore, and is also a population which can be produced with higher quality. In addition, it is proposed that processed suspicions of offences be reported on the basis of segments corresponding to those in the statistics for processed offences.

In conjunction with a revision of the statistics, sections of the previous statistics during a transitional period should be revised in tandem with new revised statistics in order to promote comparability and to render it possible to analyse the effects of the revision.