Perceptions of the justice system
in socially disadvantaged areas

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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.

Summary

Brå has been instructed by the government to study confidence in the justice system, and the sense of safety among residents in areas which the police identify as socially disadvantaged. Socially disadvantaged areas are characterized by, among other things, a large percentage of residents with low socioeconomic status, and criminal elements that have significant impact on the local community. According to the police, particularly socially disadvantaged areas are characterised by criminal presence, which has led to a widespread reluctance to participate in the criminal justice process, resulting in difficulties for the police to perform their duty. The study is partially based on processed NTU[1] data for the police's 61 socially disadvantaged areas. It is also based on a door-to-door survey[2] and interviews with residents, association representatives, municipal employees, and police in a number of socially disadvantaged areas.

The study illuminates problems in the investigated areas that must be seen as exceptional in relation to most other residential areas. There are open sales of narcotics, vandalism, littering, and traffic offences affecting the residential environment. Some of the areas are periodically subject to very serious violent criminality. Crime and public disorder have a negative impact on the residents' sense of safety and image of the police. There are also signs of structures, mainly criminal, that run parallel with, for example, the justice system. At the same time, when considering crime rates and confidence in the justice system, the results of the NTU processing do not indicate any general deterioration in the 61 areas over time. However, many residents – including those who feel relatively safe – talk about the impact on their everyday life in the interviews. Many also communicate a general feeling that their area is forgotten or treated differently than other areas, or society as a whole.

Residents feel unsafe as a consequence of crime and public disorder

Residents of socially disadvantaged areas report to a significantly higher extent than residents of other urban areas that they feel unsafe. The reasons largely appear to lie in extensive crime and public disorder, the visibility of which affects residents even if they are not victims themselves. Just over one-fifth of the residents answering the door-to-door survey state that they do not feel safe in their own residential area, and

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[1] NTU, the Swedish Crime Survey, is an annual survey conducted with a representative selection of persons 16–79 years of age. Approximately 12,000 persons respond to the survey each year.

[2] The door-to-door survey is a survey, in interview form, which is conducted with residents in two particularly socially disadvantaged areas.

approximately 36 percent state that they feel unsafe when being outdoors late in the evening.

The majority of women who live in socially disadvantaged areas state that they feel unsafe. This is almost twice as many as in other urban areas. One aspect that characterises the studied areas is the absence of women in the public space. There is much to indicate that men's dominance of the public space can have a negative impact on women's sense of safety.

The residents were asked how they experience various crime and public disorder in their area; the results show that the gravity, extensiveness, and concentration of problems all have a negative impact on the sense of safety among residents. The more problems the individual experiences, the greater the likelihood that the resident will report that they feel unsafe. The response options "gangs who fight and disrupt", "joyriding", and "open narcotics sales" had the greatest individual impact on the sense of safety. Interviews and open-ended question responses show how serious incidents, such as a shooting, can have a great impact on many residents' sense of safety. However, the problems that most residents report are littering, joyriding, cars being set on fire, and vandalism. Even this type of public disorder, which can appear less serious, has proven to have a significant impact on residents' sense of safety. In general, problems in the area are often experienced as clustered around certain times, individuals, or situations.

Many of the problems that the residents experience are associated with criminal gangs or groups of teenage boys and men – the line between them is often unclear for other residents – who loiter outdoors in the areas at night. They sometimes drive vehicles, such as mopeds, jeopardising the lives and health of residents, preventing people from passing, and sometimes behaving in a threateningly manor. It appears as though the residents who know the boys and men loitering outdoors at night feel safer than others, because they know how to act among them, and know which situations should be avoided.

In relation to the higher rate of residents that feel unsafe, they also are more inclined to take precautionary measures or change their everyday behaviour. Just under half of these residents perceive that, for example, people in the area are influenced by criminal groups, or groups based on ethnicity or religion in such a way that they do not move about freely, or keep silent if someone is vandalizing property. Even residents who state that they feel relatively safe mention how they change their day-to-day activities; many emphasising the importance of not "getting involved".

Effectiveness has the biggest effect on confidence in the police

The percentage who state that they have confidence in the police and the courts is somewhat lower in the socially disadvantaged areas than in other urban areas – approximately 55 percent. However, confidence in the police and the courts appears to have increased more than in other urban areas between the periods 2006–2011 and 2012–2017. The door-to-door survey gives us the opportunity to look more closely at different factors that affect confidence in the police and the justice system. Two results stand out as particularly interesting. Firstly, the study shows that the

single most important factor for confidence is police effectiveness, followed by police fairness. Approximately one-fourth experience the police as being effective when they arrest burglars, intervene in joyriding, and intervene in narcotics sales. In interviews and open-ended question responses, many residents expresses frustration over the fact that crime and public disorder are not rectified, and some state that the police or the Swedish justice system in general is too lax. Many view the problems as a sign that society and the justice system has abandoned the area.

A second important result is that younger people report lower levels of confidence in the police than older people, which stands in clear contrast to society as a whole. Young men, in particular, report lower levels of confidence. There are also more people in this demographic who believe that the police do not make fair decisions or treat them with respect, and that it is their obligation to do what the police tell them to do even if they don't understand, agree with, or like how the police treat them. In interviews, younger residents in particular feel discriminated against by the police, and this probably contributes to the lower levels of confidence amongst them.

To summarize, the results show how difficult it can be for the police to establish confidence amongst the residents in these areas. Some residents view insufficient effectiveness as an expression of a lax attitude, and would like tougher measures against criminals. On the other hand, repressive efforts may impact law-abiding citizens, particularly young men, if the police increase controls in the area. As a result, the police have a difficult task in terms of being effective, without damaging confidence in the police amongst residents who, for example, might experience that they are being searched or frisked by the police on erroneous grounds. Moreover, there is an apparent risk that residents will interpret both ineffectiveness and other problems as proof that their areas are forgotten or shunted aside by the police.

The will exists, but fear prevents cooperation

The results of the study indicate that most residents actually are motivated to cooperate with the police, but are prevented by fear of criminals in the area. According to the results of the door-to-door survey, most residents think that they would call the police if they witnessed a mugging or were personally the victim of assault. A significantly smaller percentage state that they think that they would testify if they had not personally been involved. More women state that they would call the police in these hypothetical situations, while more men state that they would testify. Having confidence in the police and courts generally increases the likelihood that residents would consider testifying.

It is clear from interviews and survey responses that residents' fear of reprisal is the primary reason they are reluctant to cooperate with the justice system. According to residents, they would be most unwilling to cooperate if they witnessed a crime they suspected to be connected to the criminal groups in the area. Those who perceive shootings to be a problem in the residential area appear to be less inclined to testify. Many expressed fear that relatives will be victimised. There is a widespread perception that the justice system cannot protect witnesses, and many wish that they could testify anonymously. Moreover, particularly among

younger people, there appear to be unwritten rules about not cooperating with the justice system.

Criminals are the clearest example of parallel societal structures

Parallel societal structures are, by definition, difficult to illuminate. The police use the term to identify and describe a diverse set of problems. In the report, we attempt to shed further light on and point out the subtleties of these problems. Common to many of the phenomena that relates to the term parallel societal structures is that they are somehow linked to groups that are based on a collective logic, whereby the best interests of the group, as they are interpreted by influential individuals, carry greater weight than the rights of the individual. In addition, there are groups of residents who can be perceived as living parallel to society by virtue of the fact that they do not fall within the scope of many of the societal functions, and seldom interact with people outside of their own group or area. They are outsiders in the sense that they sublet or sleep on mattresses, have not qualified for the social insurance system, are not on the regular job market, or are not deemed creditworthy. The fact that many people do not come within the scope of important societal functions and that some use alternative systems hampers the justice system's work in a more diffuse or indirect manner.

A large number of the problems that are discussed in terms of parallel structures are, in fact, linked to criminal groups. In the door-to-door survey, almost 70 percent of the residents state that there are criminal individuals or groups that have an impact on the area in some respect. Most state that they pressure individuals not to participate as witnesses. Criminal groups spread fear among residents through their reputation. These groups can be seen as parallel structures in that they are, to a significant extent, outside of society and resolve conflicts without involving the justice system. Retaliation can sometimes be used as a way to resolve or settle conflicts between criminals in socially disadvantaged areas. Significantly fewer residents, 12 percent, state that groups that are based on family ties, shared ethnicity, or shared religion, influence residents. Interviews describe a number of examples of how these groups use alternative systems other than those institutionalised in the society at large. This includes alternative ways of resolving disputes, housing, or insurance. It is important to underscore that much of this activity is not criminal and, in many respects, can even work as an important function for those involved. They may provide credit or savings systems, or routines for solving disputes of various types. Alternative systems may work more quickly and be more easily accessible than the regular systems.

However, the collected data reveals that one risk with these types of alternative systems is that the weak party – often a woman or a child – can have their human rights disregarded and that they have no ability to appeal. For example, this might involve a woman obtaining a legal divorce but nevertheless being forced to remain married according to the group's rules. Although these alternative systems can cause suffering for individuals or smaller groups, they do not appear to pose the greatest challenge to the justice system. It appears to be uncommon that alternative systems handle serious offences. However, over time, these alternative structures

may impede contact with surrounding communities and other parts of Swedish society. In general, the severest impacts on the justice system's work appear to primarily involve criminal structures and the more general effects of social exclusion and socio-economic disadvantage.

Brå's assessment

Brå concludes that both the law enforcement and crime prevention work need to be more effective. Residents in the socially disadvantaged areas have the same rights as residents in other areas to a calm and safe residential environment. To a significant degree, higher rates of distrust of the justice system and residents feeling unsafe can be seen as a reflection of the concentration of crime and public disorder in the studied areas. Brå concludes that the justice system and other parties need to develop new strategic methods and become better at identifying the hidden parallel societal structures. It should be possible to use our results as a basis for the task of making improvements.

For decades, socially disadvantaged areas have been the subject of a variety of efforts, with the aim of counteracting social exclusion. Nevertheless, the problems remain. Overall, Brå makes the assessment that future work in socially disadvantaged areas must, to a very high degree, be characterised by strategic development work, coordination, and a long-term perspective. In this context, we identify a need for the police to take a holistic view in regard of the task in the 61 socially disadvantaged areas. It is important to invest in and encourage development of new strategic methods, where experiences gained from working with specific problems of criminality can be preserved and transferred between different areas. This applies particularly to studies regarding the most serious violence, and measures against other crime and public disorder with high visibility and impact on the residents in the area.

Problems with littering, joyriding, and cars being set on fire affect many residents, but are at risk of falling between the cracks. Such problems are often regarded as insufficiently serious for investment of police resources but, at the same time, they are too extensive to be dealt with by parties such as housing corporations and municipalities. Brå believes that taking the residents' concerns seriously provides the police with an opportunity to improve confidence. The central element is not necessarily conviction, but rather having the issues stop as a result of preventive measures. Motivating police to work with issues related to public disorder, when they have difficulty solving serious crimes, is a significant challenge.

In this connection, we can also observe that there is much to indicate that the police assume more than their share of responsibility for problems that are also dependent on other parties, e.g. municipalities, schools, and property owners. Brå considers it important that the police and other parties must make strategic and joint decisions regarding the allocation of responsibility in the shared crime prevention work. This work often involves civil society. The report illustrates that municipalities and agencies sometimes risk indirectly supporting parallel societal structures. In order to avoid this, they need genuine insight into local civil society and its participants. This report offers a first explorative overview; nonetheless, additional knowledge is necessary.