



Homicide victims and perpetrators

Socio-economic status, demographic background and criminal history

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

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English summary of Brå report 2025:5

Summary

Since the 1990s, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) has repeatedly conducted studies of the extent and characteristics of homicide in Sweden, and of homicide trends over time. This study focuses on aspects that have not yet been examined in Swedish research: the socio-economic status and demographic background of victims and perpetrators at the time homicides are committed, as well as the victims and perpetrators' criminal histories. The study identifies similarities and differences between perpetrators and victims and between men and women, as well as between different age groups and different types of homicide. Using official statistics and previous research, comparisons are also made with the general population. The study also describes changes over the period 2005–2021.

Previous research shows that the risk of being convicted for crime or becoming a crime victim differs among different population groups based on gender, age, family type, Swedish/foreign background and between groups from different socio-economic conditions. People from households with limited resources, low incomes and low levels of education are at greater risk of becoming crime victims or acquiring a criminal record than those from homes with higher levels of resources. Research from recent decades also shows that offending and victimization have both become increasingly concentrated to groups with more limited resources.

The opposite trend can be observed in the relationship between those born abroad and those born in Sweden. The conviction rate has decreased among both native Swedes and people of foreign origin, but has decreased more among people born abroad. On the other hand, the excess risk of conviction for offences has increased for people born in Sweden to two foreign-born parents – which is due to the fact that the decrease in the conviction rate has been smaller for this group compared to others.

Study population, indicators, non-response and weighting

This study covers all victims and perpetrators of homicides that occurred in Sweden between 2005 and 2021. The population is drawn from Brå's

homicide research material and includes 1,521 victims and 1,175 perpetrators.

The socio-economic status and demographic background of victims and perpetrators have been examined across several dimensions: educational level, employment, income, standard of living, residence in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, household type, Swedish/foreign background, region of birth and length of residence in Sweden. In order to describe the criminal records of victims and perpetrators, data on prior convictions have been accessed from Brå's convictions register.

Register data could only be collected for those victims and perpetrators for whom the research material contains a full personal identification number. Among perpetrators, the level of missing data is relatively high and has increased over the study period, primarily as a result of an increase in the number of homicides in criminal milieux, where around 70 per cent of cases have remained unsolved, with no perpetrator having been identified. To compensate for this missing data, a weighting procedure has been used for the perpetrators.¹

The presentation of socio-economic indicators is based on incomes reported to the tax authorities and information from official registers. Some individuals may have had financial assets or resources derived from criminal activities (e.g., drug sales or fraud). Such financial resources are not reflected in the registered incomes presented here, and might be expected to be more common among people associated with certain types of homicide, such as those in criminal milieux. The income data presented in the report may therefore somewhat overestimate the differences in real economic resources between victims and perpetrators and the population as a whole. The register data presented in the report are also likely to provide a less reliable picture of the socioeconomic situation of the victims and perpetrators of homicides in criminal milieux than for other types of homicide.

The study reports aggregate results for all victims and perpetrators of homicide as well as results disaggregated by different types of homicide,

¹ The weighted data show what the results would have looked like if the socio-demographic situation and criminal histories of perpetrators in the unsolved cases resembled those of the perpetrators identified in cases that have been cleared.

including homicide in criminal milieux, homicide in intimate relationships and other family-related homicides.

Level of education

Compared to the population as a whole, the level of education was generally lower among victims and perpetrators of homicide. A significantly higher proportion of victims and perpetrators had no more than a compulsory education, and a smaller proportion had post upper-secondary education, compared to the general population.

The gap in level of education, relative to the population, also increased over the period studied. In the population as a whole, the share with no more than a compulsory education decreased. Among victims, this proportion increased, and among perpetrators it varied around the same level.

One contributing factor to the widening gap in educational levels relative to the population is the changing age distribution of victims and perpetrators. This is due to the increase in homicide in criminal milieux, where those involved are often younger than in other types of homicide. However, even when broken down by age group, trends differ between those involved in homicide and the general population. This means that the widening gap in education level is not solely an effect of the changing age distribution among homicide victims and perpetrators.

Homicide in criminal milieux stands out as the homicide type where victims had the lowest level of education – 60 per cent had no more than a compulsory education, partly as a result of the large proportion of younger people among these victims. A large proportion of the perpetrators of homicides in criminal milieux also had no more than a compulsory education (55 per cent). Among the victims and perpetrators of homicide in intimate relationships and other family-related homicides, the level of education appears to have increased somewhat over the period studied, with fewer having completed at most compulsory education and more having completed post upper-secondary education.

Employment rate and economic status

Employment

The proportion of employed persons among homicide victims and perpetrators (33 per cent and 29 per cent respectively) was about half that of the population as a whole (65 per cent). The rate of employment was higher among female victims than among male victims and both male and female perpetrators. This reflects the fact that women and men fall victim to homicide in different contexts. The proportion in employment was naturally lower among the youngest and the oldest victims and perpetrators. However, relative to the population, employment rates in all age groups were lower than in the population as a whole, among both victims and perpetrators, with the exception of persons aged 70–74 years.

Over time, the gap between the proportion of homicide victims and the population as a whole who were in employment has increased. However, this does not apply to perpetrators. Between 2005 and 2021, the share of the population in employment increased slightly, from 64 to 67 per cent, and among perpetrators from approximately 25 to just over 30 per cent. The share of homicide victims who were in employment instead decreased, from approximately 35 to approximately 30 per cent.

The employment rate was low among both victims and perpetrators of homicide in criminal milieux (20 and 24 per cent respectively), with a high proportion of young people among both victims and perpetrators. In contrast, employment rates were higher among both victims and perpetrators of homicide in intimate relationships (49 per cent and 41 per cent, respectively).

Income

Compared to the general population, average incomes were lower among both homicide victims and perpetrators. Among victims, the average income per household member was 66 per cent of the average income of the population, and among perpetrators, 58 per cent. Among both victims and perpetrators, women had on average higher incomes than men.

There is a clear concentration of both victims and perpetrators of homicide in the lowest-income segment of the population: 45 per cent of victims and 51 per cent of perpetrators had an income that corresponded to the lowest income decile within the population. However, the proportion was

significantly lower among female victims (30 per cent) than among male victims and both male and female perpetrators.

The difference in income relative to the population has also increased over the period examined. The average income of homicide victims declined from around 70 per cent to just over half the average income of the population, while that of perpetrators fell from around 60 per cent to around 50 per cent. The proportion of people in the lowest income decile also increased among both victims and perpetrators.

Average disposable income was relatively similar for perpetrators across different types of homicide. Perpetrators of homicide in intimate relationships constitute an exception, with this group on average having a higher disposable income. Among victims, there was more variation in average incomes across different types of homicide. The lowest average disposable income was found among the victims of homicides in criminal milieux.

The proportion belonging to the lowest population income decile was highest for homicide in criminal milieux: 62 per cent of victims and 59 per cent of perpetrators. The corresponding proportion was significantly lower among victims and perpetrators of homicide in intimate relationships (33 per cent and 40 per cent respectively) and among victims of other family-related homicides (30 per cent).

Inadequate standard of living

Among homicide victims and perpetrators, approximately one fifth (19 and 23 per cent respectively) had a disposable income per household member that fell below the threshold for an adequate standard of living, such that total household income was insufficient to pay for the family's basic necessities. The share of the general population with a low-income standard (a similar measure used for the purposes of comparison) was significantly lower – an annual average of 6 per cent for the period 2011–2020.

Among homicide victims, a significantly smaller proportion of women than men lived below the adequate-standard-of-living threshold: 10 percent of women and 23 per cent of men.

As regards the trend over time, the difference in relation to the population has increased. The share of people with a low-income standard decreased slightly in the population as a whole over the period 2012–2021, from 7 to

5 per cent. By contrast, the proportion of homicide victims living in households with an inadequate standard of living increased from approximately 15 to over 20 per cent. Among perpetrators, the proportion increased slightly during the period 2012–2017, before decreasing again to around the same level as at the beginning of the period.

Among homicide victims, the proportion with an inadequate standard of living was higher for victims of homicides in criminal milieux than for victims of homicide in intimate relationships and other family-related homicides. Among perpetrators, however, the proportion with an inadequate standard of living was highest for perpetrators of other family-related homicides (33 per cent) and lowest for perpetrators of homicide in intimate relationships (13 per cent).

Socio-economically disadvantaged areas and household type

Socio-economically disadvantaged areas

A significantly higher proportion of homicide victims and perpetrators lived in socio-economically disadvantaged areas than in the population as a whole. Among victims and perpetrators, the proportion living in areas with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage was three times greater (16 and 15 per cent respectively) than in the population as a whole (5 per cent).

During the period 2012–2021, the proportion of the population living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas has hardly changed. However, the proportion of homicide perpetrators living in such areas increased from approximately 20 to 30 per cent. Among homicide victims, the proportion living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas was greater in the middle of the period (2015–2018), but was at roughly similar levels at the beginning and end of the period. This is not the case for victims of homicide in intimate relationships, however, where the proportion living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas increased.

In the population as a whole, the proportion living in areas with varying degrees of socio-economic advantage or disadvantage was similar among women and men. However, for homicide victims and perpetrators, a larger proportion of men than women lived in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Younger victims and perpetrators were more likely to live in socio-economically disadvantaged areas than their older counterparts. Among

both victims and perpetrators, the proportion living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas was greatest for homicides in criminal milieux, at 46 per cent in both groups.

Household type and single parents

Homicide victims and perpetrators were more likely to live alone (with or without children) than the population as a whole. In the case of single-parent households, almost twice as many victims and perpetrators belonged to such a household (12 and 13 per cent respectively) compared to the population as a whole (7 per cent). Once again, the gap between the population as a whole and both homicide victims and perpetrators has increased over time. The proportion of victims and perpetrators belonging to a single-parent household was particularly high for homicides related to conflicts in criminal milieux (19 and 22 per cent respectively) and for other family-related homicides (15 and 20 per cent respectively).

Swedish/foreign background

More than twice as many homicide victims and perpetrators were of foreign background (49 and 43 per cent respectively) than in the population as a whole (21 per cent). Among both victims and perpetrators, a larger proportion of men (53 and 44 per cent respectively) than women (38 and 30 per cent respectively) had a foreign background. The over-representation of people of foreign background was higher among victims than among perpetrators.

People of foreign background were over-represented in all age groups. However, this over-representation was greater among younger than older people, for both victims and perpetrators. Among homicide victims, the over-representation was particularly great for native-born individuals with two foreign-born parents in the age groups 20–24 years and 25–29 years. Among these, there were 173 and 116 homicide victims per 100,000 of population, respectively, compared to 16 victims per 100,000 of population among native-born individuals with two native-born parents.

The proportion of people of foreign background was highest among homicides related to conflicts in criminal milieux: 80 per cent of victims and 64 per cent of perpetrators.

Over time, the over-representation of people of foreign background among homicide victims has increased. This change primarily relates to younger victims. The increased over-representation of young people of foreign background among homicide victims is in part linked to the increase in gun violence in criminal milieux, where the victims are often young men. However, the proportion of people of foreign background has also increased among victims of other types of homicide, indicating that this trend cannot be attributed solely to the increase in the number of homicides in criminal milieux. Among perpetrators, the proportion of individuals of foreign background has increased among homicides in criminal milieux, but not among other types of homicide.

Region of birth

The number of homicide victims per 100,000 of population was highest among people born in Africa, followed by those born in Asia. For example, among 16–19-year-olds born in Africa, the homicide rate was 161 per 100,000 of population, while the rate was 78 per 100,000 among 16–19-year-olds born in Asia. The corresponding rate for 16–19-year-olds born in Sweden was 15 per 100,000 of population.

A similar pattern can be seen among homicide perpetrators. The level of over-representation was greatest for individuals born in Africa in all age groups, with the highest number of perpetrators per 100,000 of population being found among 20–24-year-olds born in Africa (175 per 100,000). However, in most age groups, the number of perpetrators per 100,000 of population was higher among individuals born in a group of countries that includes Europe, the Americas and Oceania than among persons born in Asia, which differs from the pattern found among homicide victims.

Length of residence

The foreign-born homicide victims and perpetrators had often been living in Sweden for a long time before the homicide occurred. This is perhaps to be expected, since the study includes those victims and perpetrators with a personal identity number and who were therefore registered residents of Sweden at the time of the homicide. The victims and perpetrators had been residing in Sweden for an average of 16 and 15 years respectively prior to the homicide.

However, the length of residence varied greatly between individuals. Among homicide victims, the length of time spent in Sweden varied from a

minimum of about three weeks to a maximum of over 60 years, and among perpetrators from less than two weeks to almost 70 years.

Criminal record

A total of 24 per cent of victims and 28 per cent of perpetrators had been convicted of offences in the year prior to the homicide. This proportion was more than 20 times as large as in the population as a whole, where an annual average of 1.2 per cent of the population aged 15 and over was convicted of an offence between 2004 and 2020. Over time, the difference in conviction rates between the population as a whole and homicide victims and perpetrators has increased. The proportion convicted of an offence was significantly higher among men than among women, both among homicide victims and perpetrators and in the population as a whole. For both victims and perpetrators, the proportion with a criminal record was highest for homicides related to conflicts in criminal milieux.

Drug offences were the category of offence for which the largest proportion had previously been convicted. For both victims and perpetrators this was followed by miscellaneous traffic offences, theft, robbery and unlawful appropriation, unlawful possession of a firearm or knife, and various types of violent crime (offences against life and health).

The proportion of both victims and perpetrators convicted of drug offences increased between 2005 and 2021. This reflects a more general overall increase in the number of convictions for drug offences – an increase primarily explained by a shift in the prioritisation of drug offending on the part of the police and the criminal justice system, rather than by any real change in drug offending. Among homicide victims, the proportion convicted of at least one firearm or knife offence has doubled, at least in relation to the years 2005–2009, and an increase in the proportion convicted of firearm or knife offences was also observed for perpetrators at the end of the period.

Overall conclusions

A number of overall conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the report's findings.

Large differences compared to the population as a whole and increasing differences over time

One initial overall conclusion is that homicide victims and perpetrators fare significantly worse in relation to most of the indicators studied than the population as a whole. For many of the indicators examined, differences between the general population and homicide victims and perpetrators have also increased over time. In relation to the general population, both victims and perpetrators were more socio-economically disadvantaged in 2021 than in 2005, and a higher proportion of both groups had prior convictions. This is partly because the situation in the population has improved on several of the indicators, but also because there has been a deterioration over time in the socio-economic situation of homicide victims and perpetrators.

The increase in homicides in criminal milieux has contributed to this trend, but other types of homicide have also changed

The shift in the composition of homicide victims and perpetrators, towards an increasing number and proportion linked to homicides in criminal milieux, has impacted most of the results focused on changes over time. Victims and perpetrators of homicides in criminal milieux fare worse on most indicators than the victims and perpetrators of other types of homicide. At the same time, a deterioration over time has also been observed for several of the indicators in relation to other types of homicide. Thus, the increase in homicides in criminal milieux cannot alone account for the deterioration that can be observed over time at the group level for either victims or perpetrators.

Victims and perpetrators often have a similar socio-economic situation, but differences between types of homicide

The socio-economic situation of homicide victims and perpetrators is often similar for those types of homicide where victims and perpetrators can reasonably be assumed to share a household or social context, such as homicides in intimate relationships or criminal milieux. In those types of homicide where it can be assumed that victims and perpetrators come from different social contexts, as is the case in certain types of family-related homicide (which include homicides between adult family members who do not share a household and may thus live under differing socio-economic conditions), differences are greater. The results also show that there are smaller differences in the socio-economic situation of perpetrators across

different types of homicide, and larger differences in the socio-economic situation of victims.

Perpetrators generally have a slightly worse socio-economic situation than victims, with some exceptions

As a group, homicide perpetrators generally have a slightly worse socio-economic situation than homicide victims. This pattern remains even when the results are broken down by type of homicide, with the exception of homicides related to conflicts in criminal milieux. In this type of homicide, the situation of victims was sometimes worse than that of the perpetrators.

The different social contexts of women and men are of significance

The report's findings show that, on average, the women included in the study came from better socio-economic conditions than the men, particularly among the homicide victims. This is because homicides involving women and men respectively occur in different contexts. More than 70 per cent of female homicide victims had been killed in the context of an intimate relationship or by another family member, while 70 per cent of male victims had been killed in the context of either a conflict in a criminal milieu or other types of conflicts and disputes outside the family.

Foreign background: differing trends in levels of over-representation among victims and perpetrators

One main conclusion is that the proportion of people of foreign background is larger among homicide victims and perpetrators than in the population as a whole. Given the over-representation of people of foreign background among both crime victims and registered offenders more generally, this result is not unexpected. However, the report also shows that the over-representation of people of foreign background was greater among homicide victims than among perpetrators. The over-representation of people of foreign background has also clearly increased among younger homicide victims, while for perpetrators, the trend in levels of over-representation is less clear cut.