

SUMMARY

English summary of Brå report No 2009:6

Serious Violence at School

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brottsförebyggande rådet

Serious Violence at School

A summary of report 2009:6

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

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention works to reduce crime and improve levels of safety in society by producing data and disseminating knowledge on crime and crime prevention work.

This report is a summary of the Swedish report *Grövre våld I skolan*, report no 2009:6, which can be ordered from Fritzes Kundservice, 106 47 Stockholm.
Phone +46 (0)8-690 91 90, fax +46 (0)8-690 91 91, e-mail order.fritzes@nj.se

This English report can be downloaded from www.bra.se

Production: Brottsförebyggande rådet, Information och förlag, Box 1386, 111 93 Stockholm.
Phone +46 (0)8-401 87 00, fax +46 (0)8-411 90 75, e-mail info@bra.se
Brå on the Internet www.bra.se
Authors: Felipe Estrada, Sven Granath, David Shannon and Nina Törnqvist
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Introduction

In the light of the shooting outrage at Jokela School, in Finland, in 2007, in which eight people were shot to death, and following on from other serious violent offences at schools, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) was instructed by the Department of Education to conduct an investigation into serious violent crime at Swedish schools. The focus of the National Council's report is therefore directed at violence that commonly results in physical injury. The Swedish Government has instructed a number of other agencies to disseminate knowledge on programmes to combat bullying and other forms of humiliating treatment. The Government instructed the National Council for Crime Prevention to address the following three areas.

1. A quantitative examination of serious school violence

This section of the report begins by presenting the findings from previous Swedish studies of serious violence in schools. The principal focus is directed however at new analyses of data from a variety of sources which describe the extent of and trends over time in serious violence at school. One of the important questions addressed is that of what characterises the incidents of serious school violence that have taken place in Sweden.

2. International experiences of preventing serious school violence

The National Council's review of the research literature illuminates what the research says about the possibilities for preventing the most serious incidents of school violence in the form of school shootings. The review also describes what the research literature has to say about the links between bullying and school violence and about the possibilities for preventing serious violence at school.

3. Swedish schools' view of serious school violence

The third area focused on by the National Council relates to the prevention work which is being carried out in Swedish schools today. On the basis of questionnaires and interviews, we look at how students and others in the school system assess the way violent incidents are dealt with, examining the obstacles, possibilities and needs for preventive measures that different groups identify on the basis of their roles within the school system.

A quantitative examination of serious school violence

The National Council's review of studies in which young people have been surveyed on their exposure to serious school violence shows that such violence most often affects boys at the secondary school level. The same pattern is found in data based on incidents of school violence reported to the police, where the majority of violent incidents involve boys both as perpetrators and victims. The use of weapons, most often blunt objects, is noted in one tenth of the assault incidents reported to the police that occurred in schools. At least until the end of the 1990s, the school violence that was reported to the police included few incidents of a serious nature.

Another way of illuminating the extent of serious school violence is by examining the exposure of teachers and other members of staff to violence. Here too, levels of exposure to violence are highest at the compulsory school level. Health and safety at work surveys show that compulsory school teachers are exposed to threats or violence approximately twice as often as teachers working

in further education. Statistics relating to injuries at the work-place show that students are most commonly both the victims and perpetrators of the incidents reported.

Surveys point to an unchanged pattern

Research shows that, during the 1990s, opinions changed regarding how schools were to deal with order problems. This has led to a considerable increase in the number of less serious violent incidents being reported to the police. The number of reports of injuries suffered at work by teachers has also increased.. However, the Swedish National Agency for Education's surveys of students' and teachers' attitudes to school (between 1997 and 2006), show that the proportion of teachers reporting exposure to violence, threats and intimidation at their workplaces during the past year has remained stable. A corresponding stability is found in surveys in which students report on their exposure to violence. The National Council's self-report survey among Swedish ninth-grade students (approximately 15 years of age) shows that between 1995 and 2005 an average of 2 per cent of students per year have reported that the most recent incident of serious violence to which they were exposed had taken place at school (Figure 1).

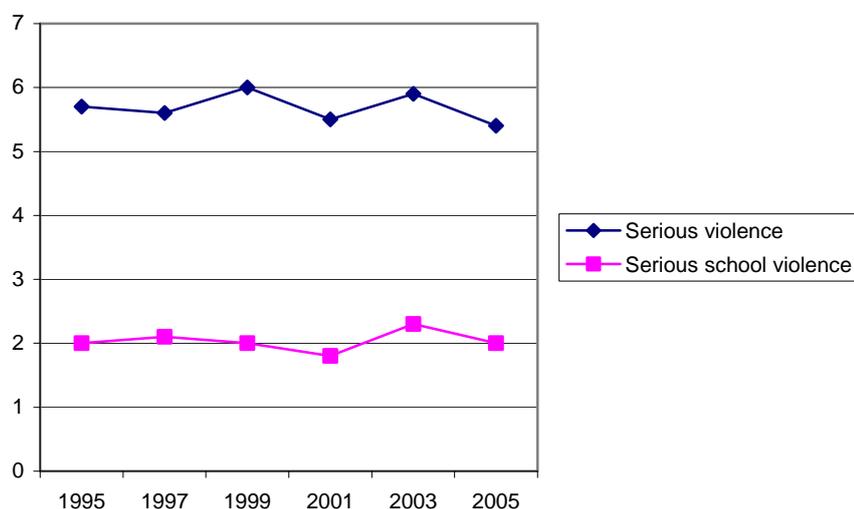


Figure 1. Proportion of students exposed to serious violence, and proportion reporting the most recent incident took place at school, 1995–2005.

The majority of serious violent crime by young people does not occur at school

One way of studying the occurrence of serious violent crime in the school environment is to examine court judgements relating to youths found guilty of serious acts of violence at school. Here the definition of serious violence employed relates to acts defined as aggravated assault and attempted and consummated homicide committed by 15 to 17-year-olds, in other words, the most serious forms of violent crime that have taken place at Swedish schools. The National Council's survey shows that the serious violent crimes for which youths are convicted very rarely take place at school. Out of a total of 700 court judgements relating to 15–17-year-olds convicted of aggravated assault or lethal violence from the years 1984 to 2007, 22 cases, or 3 per cent of the total, related to incidents that had occurred at school. Of these 22 cases, 17 convictions were for

aggravated assault and five related to attempted murder or manslaughter. None of the judgements related to an incident of consummated lethal violence.

Three typical examples of the most serious school violence in Sweden

What kind of incidents of school violence do we find among young 15–17-year-olds convicted of serious violence? In each of the 22 school violence cases the perpetrators were boys, and approximately half of them had previous convictions for crime or had previously come into contact with the police and the social services. With a small number of exceptions, the court judgements typically relate to one of three different types of incident, which occurred with roughly equal frequency.

1. A teenage male with a substantial record of prior involvement in crime goes to a school with a group of friends in order to get even with a student who someone in the group has been in conflict with or has felt insulted by. The gang confronts the victim in the schoolyard. The victim or one of the victim's friends is then subjected to serious violence – punches, kicks or stab-wounds – of a non-life-threatening character. The teenager who leads the visiting gang is not necessarily himself a student at the school in question.
2. A psychologically unstable student who, for a shorter or longer period of time has felt humiliated or bullied by an individual student or teacher one day takes a knife with him to school. When he meets the student or teacher in question on the school premises, he subjects the victim to life-threatening stab-wounds or to an attempt at violence of this kind.
3. Two students, one of whom is already known to the police and social services as a result of less serious crimes, suddenly start fighting with one another, in the presence of other students. They have not previously been in conflict with one another, and the fight occurs spontaneously as a result of something very minor. However, the situation escalates quickly from pushing and punching to one where one of the combatants gains the upper hand and lands so many blows and kicks on his opponent that the latter loses consciousness.

Assaults reported to the police often relate to less serious incidents

It is most likely that of the violent incidents that occur in school, it is the more serious ones that are most commonly reported to the police. It is therefore relevant to study serious violence at school on the basis of police reports relating to incidents of assault. On the basis of the information contained in these reports, it is possible to describe the nature of the serious violence occurring at school, e.g. in terms of who was involved, how serious the violence was, where it took place and whether any adults were present when the violence occurred.

The analysis is based on a total of 336 police reports relating to assault and 20 reports relating to aggravated assault, where it is clear from the reports that the incidents took place at secondary schools or colleges of further education in the course of 2007. The material was “weighted” so that half of the incidents relate to girls and half to boys. In 2007 only a very small proportion of the assaults reported to the police that occurred at school were classified as aggravated assault. It was often the use of weapons that resulted in such incidents being classified as aggravated assault. This becomes clear when reports relating to assault are compared with those relating to aggravated assault. Among the latter, weapons had been used in nearly half of the cases reported, whereas they were used in

only fifteen percent of non-aggravated assaults against boys, and in only seven percent of such assaults against girls. Regardless of the offence classification, the most common type of weapon used is some form of sharp object or a blunt-force instrument, such as a plank or chair etc. Knives and other sharp objects are more unusual, and firearms have not been referred to in any of the police reports. Even when weapons are mentioned in the police reports, it is rare for these to have led to any actual injuries to the victim.

Violence occurs most often when adults are not present

According to the police reports, the most common locations of violent incidents are school corridors and schoolyards. A closer examination of the assault reports shows that violence between students often occurs when no adults are present. This is the case in 75 per cent of the reports examined, as can be seen from Table 1, regardless of whether the victims were boys or girls. The lack of an adult presence is all the more evident when it comes to incidents which lead to more serious violence. This pattern is also reflected both in the cases involving male victims and those involving female victims. The presence of adults is probably not only important for reducing the risk of violence occurring initially, but their presence can also serve to interrupt a violent incident before the seriousness of the violence escalates.

Table 1. Proportion of assault reports, including aggravated, in schools in 2007, by the presence of adults, serious incidents (series of blows, kicks or worse) and relatively minor incidents (individual blows, kicks or less serious, e.g. pushing). Percent.

	<i>All police reports (N=264)</i>	<i>Relatively minor (N = 166)</i>	<i>Serious (n = 98)</i>
No adult present	75 %	72 %	95 %
At least one adult present	25 %	28 %	5 %

Self-reported exposure to serious violence at school

The experiences of violence described by youths in the recurrent self-report survey conducted by the National Council are valuable since these are not restricted to cases that are reported to the police. Particularly significant is the fact that these data allow us to analyse the relationship between on the one hand less serious incidents of violence that nonetheless result in injury and on the other humiliation and bullying and also the school environment as it is experienced by students generally. As can be seen from Figure 1, the Swedish self-report studies on crime and victimisation among ninth graders show that two percent of the students reported that their most recent experience of exposure to serious violence took place at school. Boys report this being the case more frequently than girls, but otherwise the differences are small between different socio-demographic groups.

Bullying and the school environment – important explanatory factors for the occurrence of serious violence in schools

Approximately one in ten boys and girls in the ninth grade report that they have sometimes or often been exposed to bullying. As can be seen from Figure 2, there is also a clear trend whereby the occurrence of more serious school violence is higher the more often students report having been exposed to bullying. The pat-

tern is identical for both boys and girls, although this has been excluded from the figure. Almost one in ten of the students surveyed who report that they are often bullied have also reported that they have been subjected to more serious forms of violence during the past year, as opposed to one in one hundred of the students who reported that they had never been bullied.

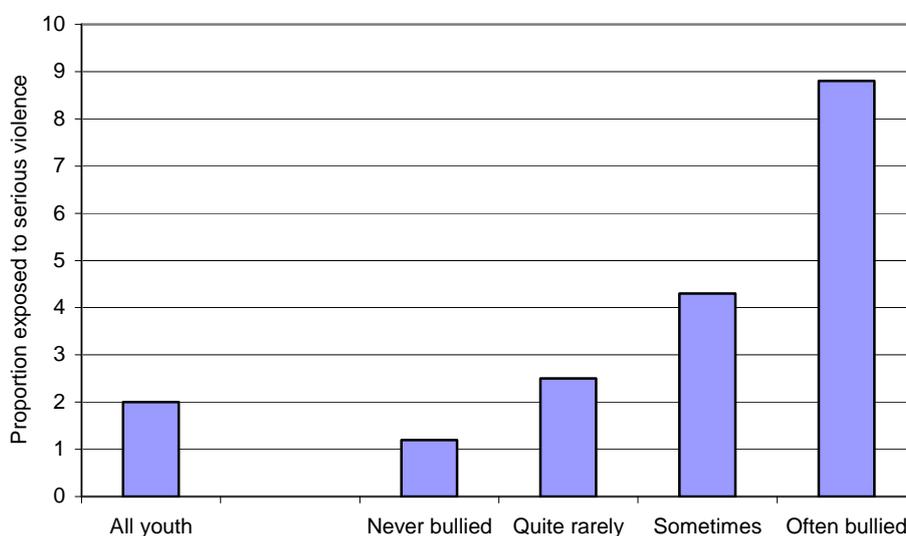


Figure 2. Proportion of ninth-grade students who report that they have been exposed to serious violent incidents at school. All students, and by level of self-reported exposure to bullying. 1995–2005. Percent.

Thus exposure to school violence varies depending on the frequency with which youths have been exposed to bullying. The existence of this relationship makes it relevant to look more closely at other conditions relating to the school environment of students exposed to violence. These conditions are not least interesting because adults have a substantial potential to positively influence them. The report shows that levels of exposure to violence are significantly lower among students who state that most teachers are of a good standard and that they enjoy being in school. This does not seem only to be a reflection of the individual student’s own situation, since the results indicate that there is a link between the extent of school violence and the nature of the school environment. Regardless of an individual student’s own exposure to bullying, the risk of being exposed to violence is substantially greater for those ninth-graders who report that a lot of bullying occurs at their particular school.

International experiences of preventing serious school violence

The National Council's review of the international research literature shows that over recent years a consistent view has emerged as to how schools should work to minimise the risk of exposure to the most serious type of school violence in the form of school shootings. One central element involves working to ensure that information relating to impending acts of violence at school comes to the attention of adults in time to allow preventive measures to be taken. At the same time, it is clear from the literature that the general environment within a school and the measures taken to reduce the risk of less serious forms of violence and

bullying also play a central roll in reducing the risk for all forms of school violence, including the kind of exceptional violent incidents that have been witnessed in amongst other places the USA and Finland.

Youths who have committed acts of lethal violence in school are a heterogeneous group

American research on school shootings describes different types of lethal violence in schools. On the one hand, there are school shootings that have taken place in socially deprived inner-city schools. Here, the violence is regarded as being an extension of the firearms-based violence that is characteristic of the neighbourhoods surrounding these schools. On the other hand, there are school shootings that have first and foremost occurred in suburban schools and rural areas, often in economically prosperous middle-class areas, and which have relatively often resulted in several people being killed or wounded simultaneously.

Research shows that the perpetrators of school shootings are far too different from one another to allow for the development of a usable "profile" of the type of student who is at risk of committing violent acts of this kind. Some school shootings have been carried out by youths who were characterised by well-established predictors of violent behaviour, whereas others have been carried out by students who have instead displayed characteristics described in the literature as protective factors against the development of violent behaviour. The research therefore concludes that student profiling, i.e. attempting to identify potential school shooters before they start shooting, is simply not a reasonable alternative for the prevention of lethal school violence.

Threat assessment regarded as the most promising strategy to prevent lethal school violence

In their efforts to develop an alternative to student profiling, researchers have noted that school shootings have taken the form of planned rather than spontaneous, impulsive actions, and that prior to the shootings, the perpetrators have most commonly shown signs that they were considering some form of serious violent attack. In addition, it has sometimes been possible to prevent violent acts of this kind due to the fact that students have told an adult about threats from a classmate or other worrying forms of behaviour.

Proceeding from this insight, researchers argue that the most promising strategy for preventing lethal school violence is to introduce a programme of systematic threat assessment in schools. This would involve on the one hand working to maximise the likelihood that knowable information about planned acts of violence comes to the attention of the adults in school, and on the other that schools systematically evaluate and react to this information. Threat assessment work requires the collation of information from a variety of sources. The school's principal or vice-principal is regarded as the most appropriate person to lead the threat assessment team.

A good school climate is an essential pre-requisite for threat assessment

An essential requirement for the threat assessment model is that serious threats actually come to the attention of adults at school. The factors identified as being important in this context are, firstly, that all students have a trusting relationship with at least one adult at school, and, secondly, that students are given the opportunity to confidentially report both their own problems and any concerns they may have regarding other students. A third important factor relates to the creation of a sense of attachment to the school, which, at the same time, also gives the students a sense of their own responsibility in keeping their school safe.

Research shows that rigid and punitive disciplinary practices in school are most likely to be counter-productive and damaging. Among other things, such strategies reduce the space available to adults at school to act on the basis of the circumstances of the specific situation at hand. In addition, such strategies are viewed as being detrimental to the chances of creating an environment where students feel an emotional attachment to school and as strengthening the barriers to the essential communication between students and adults.

Preventing bullying and less serious violence is an important part of the work to combat the most serious types of violence

Everyday violence and bullying turn schools into less secure environments for both students and adults, and thereby reduce the chances of creating a climate of openness in which the students also feel an emotional attachment to their school. In addition, researchers are unanimous in emphasising exposure to bullying and other forms of harassment at school as important contributory factors in many of the acts of lethal violence committed in American schools. Measures focused on reducing bullying and other forms of violence at schools therefore represent a central element in the work to combat even the most serious forms of school violence.

How schools should work to prevent everyday violence

Researchers argue that strategies for preventing violence should incorporate elements focused both on primary or universal prevention and on secondary or selective prevention. In the school environment, primary prevention for the most part involves universal measures focused amongst other things on equipping all students with the skills required to enable them to deal with situations without resorting to violence. Secondary prevention is instead focused on the implementation of special measures for individuals with different types of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and who are at greater risk of engaging in acts of violence. A third component, labelled tertiary prevention, involves reacting preventively when violence of some kind has already taken place.

The research literature presents a range of different types of violence prevention methods focused on each of these different levels of prevention, and which have also been evaluated. Researchers argue however that different methods are appropriate depending on the specific context of the individual school. To be effective, violence preventative strategies should therefore be developed locally and must take account of the individual school's strengths and weaknesses. This requires a comprehensive, data-based analysis of the individual school's specific problems and needs.

Serious school violence – the schools' view of the problem

The National Council's presentation of how schools themselves describe serious school violence and violence prevention measures is based partly on interviews with different groups in schools, such as students, teachers, nurses and principals, and partly on a nationally representative questionnaire survey of principals at secondary schools and colleges of further education. The aim is to illustrate, from the schools' perspective, the factors perceived as being important for the management of violent situations when they arise, and for the prevention of serious violence in the school environment.

School – a safe place despite the presence of factors that can lead to serious violence

Both the questionnaires completed by school principals and the subsequent interviews confirm that serious violence is rare in schools. The survey data show that there are clear thresholds when it comes to the occurrence of different forms of violence at school – non-physical violence, such as insults and verbal humiliation, is more frequent than less serious forms of physical violence, which, in turn, are considerably more common than serious physical violence. Nor did the principals who completed the questionnaire give the impression that they were worried about violence in their schools or that this violence had any major impact on either the safety of their school or the quality of the learning environment.

The interviews also revealed that serious physical violence is perceived as something distant or even foreign to the interview participants' own schools, and schools were generally perceived as being calm and safe places. Solidarity, tolerance and knowing one another well were identified as reasons why the occurrence of violence at school constitutes the exception rather than the rule. At the same time, it emerged in the interviews that students, teachers and adults felt that all schools are characterised by a variety of factors that could lead to violence, such as social hierarchies and various forms of symbolic physical behaviours among the students. In the interviews, the participants argued that it is very rare for a conflict at school to escalate into violence that results in physical injuries, but that violent incidents do occur from time to time at the majority of schools. A positive atmosphere and the absence of violence at a school could thus not be taken for granted, but was something that the school had to constantly work on.

Support from school management essential for dealing with violence at school

Somewhat different views emerged in the questionnaire and at interview as to how well prepared schools are when it comes to managing violent situations. While the responses to the questionnaire suggest that principals view their schools as being well-prepared to cope with serious violent incidents, the interview participants expressed a considerably more ambivalent view of their schools' capacity to manage acute situations – teachers, school stewards, counsellors, principals and others at the schools generally felt they were both well-prepared and unprepared.

In the interviews, a connection was often made between a school's level of preparedness, and having a collective approach, the support of school management and colleagues, and knowledge about and training in how to react to violent situations. At the same time, those interviewed stated to a large degree, that in the event of a concrete violent situation, they relied first and foremost on their own previous experiences. Collective action plans against violence were seldom perceived as being an important part of how one acted in an acute violent incident. Those interviewed argued that the most significant factor for being able to deal with violence at school is that the staff have a pre-existing, personal relationship with those involved and that there is confidence that the school as a whole does not avoid taking the matter in hand.

Experience shows that violence is best prevented through good relationships

A somewhat inconsistent picture also emerged from the questionnaire and interview data respectively in relation to the question of schools' ability to combat serious violence. The questionnaire shows that schools use several different kinds of violence prevention measures and that most principals are of the view that

there are sufficient resources and knowledge at their school to create a long-term and systematic violence prevention programme. However, the interview participants' view of their schools' ability to combat incidents of serious violence was that violence prevention work is rarely prioritised, and this was first and foremost linked to the clarity or lack of clarity of the school management's position on these issues and to a lack of commitment, knowledge, and time among the staff at the school. In the course of different interviews, principals, teachers and others at school spoke of the difficulties of putting together a violence prevention programme that the whole school was united behind and that this is not something that can be agreed "once and for all". A good school environment is something that must be recreated time and again. Some interview participants also felt that there is a risk that violence prevention work may become no more than a "gimmick" that doesn't mean very much, if space is not created for this work, and if the work is not conducted continuously, as part of the everyday life of the school.

On the basis of the interviews, the ability of schools to create close and trusting relationships in the school environment emerges as the most important violence prevention measure. Creating such relationships involves having personal contacts and recognising students as individuals. The presence of a continuous dialogue between students and staff members was also viewed as improving the chances of students worried about a possible serious violent incident turning to an adult and not feeling that they are about to "snitch" or "grass" on a school-mate. Participants at several interviews mentioned that one condition necessary for succeeding with prevention work is to work with the students and not against them. Both students and adults argued that adults must be accessible and must reach out and make contact with students, especially those who are experiencing difficulties in other areas of their lives. Interview participants also felt that situational prevention measures, such as open-plan premises and the presence of adults in school corridors and the dining-hall, constituted a meaningful means of preventing violence in schools.

The National Council's assessment

In recent years, the world has witnessed a number of tragic, serious violent incidents in the form of school shootings. What has characterised these assaults is that an armed student has killed or wounded several individuals. Here in Sweden, no such incident has taken place at a school, but these events inevitably attract a great deal of attention and give rise to concerns that something similar could happen here. Despite the fact that most serious violent incidents are difficult to predict, one of the National Council's objectives has been to identify the conditions that are of relevance to a preventive strategy to combat serious violence in schools. This work has been carried out in several ways. The report presents analyses based on a large sample of the most serious violent incidents involving youths in Sweden from the past 25 years. Information provided by ninth graders in the Council's school survey on crime has been used to analyse the link between bullying and serious violence at school. The National Council has also examined international experiences of preventive measures focused on the most serious forms of violence. An important part of the Council's task has finally been to chart Swedish schools' experiences of serious violence and the ways in which those who work in Swedish schools work to combat the occurrence of violence of this kind.

The violence analysed in the report comprises first and foremost the most serious forms of physical violence, i.e. those that result in personal injuries. There

follows a short summary and discussion of the central findings presented in the report and of their significance for the work of violence prevention.

Serious violence is not part of the everyday life of Swedish schools

The different sources of information that have been used in this report show that the most serious forms of violence are very unusual in the school system. Since the middle of the 1980s, roughly one 15–17-year-old per year has been convicted in connection with an incident that took place at school and that was classified as aggravated assault or attempted homicide. The analysis of assault cases reported to the police indicates that the violence that occurs at school does not usually result in serious injury and that it is perpetrated by students without the use of weapons. In addition, the principals who completed the National Council's questionnaire describe serious violence as something that is quite foreign to everyday school life. Assessing trends in violence is always difficult. On the basis of the data supplied by ninth graders on their own exposure to violence at school, however, there is nothing to suggest that the level of violence has increased since these studies began in the mid 1990s.

At the same time, it is clear from both the National Council's school survey and the interviews conducted with students and staff that serious violence at school is linked to other, more routine problems at school. These take the form of threats, bullying and other forms of humiliation and violence, all of which increase the risk for more serious forms of violence. In other words, there is very good reason to continue developing the work of violence prevention in Swedish schools.

The causes of violence are many and complex

A reasonable point of departure for the work of violence prevention is to ascertain what it is that is to be prevented and how it has occurred. There is no single factor that can explain violent behaviour. Instead, researchers agree that the incidents of serious violence that take place at school, like those that occur elsewhere, may be viewed as the result of a range of different processes, with contributory factors being found in the individual, in the family, in the peer group, the neighbourhood, in society at large and, of course, in the school environment itself. This constitutes both a problem and an advantage for the work of violence prevention. It is simply not possible to identify a single cure-all measure that can be implemented rapidly, but at the same time there are a range of opportunities for society to affect the risk that conflicts will arise, or escalate once they have occurred. The work to minimise the risk for incidents of serious violence must therefore be wide-ranging. Having said this, the focus of the measures presented below is directed at what can be done in schools by those who work in the school environment.

Are other countries' experiences of serious school violence relevant to Sweden?

The conditions that affect the violent behaviour of young people at school also form a part of a larger societal context. This broader context influences, among other things, the likelihood of a violent incident resulting in a life-threatening injury or, in a worst-case scenario, resulting in one or more deaths. One clear example of this is the way in which the outcome of the eruptions of violence that have occurred at various schools, in addition to the influence of the many underlying causal factors, have also been affected by the ease with which youths can gain access to firearms. The vast majority of mass school shootings have taken place in the USA, which is also the country where most of the published research on preventing lethal school violence has been produced.

It is therefore important to ask to what degree the conclusions drawn in research from the USA can be relevant for the school violence that occurs in a country as different as Sweden. It is a fact that we have never experienced a school shooting with multiple victims, and that lethal violence or attempted homicide of any kind are extremely rare in Swedish schools. At the same time, in the background to this report lie two tragic incidents that occurred in our neighbouring country, Finland. Both of these incidents share many of the characteristics associated with school shootings that have taken place in the USA. A comparison of the research literature on school shootings in the USA with the results from the National Council's own examination of court judgements relating to the most serious forms of violence at Swedish schools, indicate that there are a number of important parallels. One such similarity is that the incidents described in the Swedish court judgements to a large degree involve planned rather than spontaneous or impulsive acts of violence. The National Council's study identifies, for example, a typical case where a youth with a history of involvement in crime comes into conflict with someone at the school, which in turn escalates, and finally culminates in a planned assault. Another typical case that emerged from the court judgements relates to a psychologically unstable student who, following some form of humiliating treatment from others at school, feels a need to exact revenge on certain individuals and therefore takes a weapon to the school. These two typical cases from the Swedish material correspond in certain regards to the different types of incident that have been described in the American research on school shootings.

The obvious differences in the occurrence of the most serious forms of school violence could therefore, at least in part, be viewed as being a result of differences in the types of weapons used by the perpetrators – firearms in the USA and Finland, sharp-objects and blunt-force weapons in Sweden. With this in mind, it is evident that adequate firearms controls constitute an important violence prevention factor. But it is also evident that there are similarities between the USA and Sweden in the underlying processes that lead to the most serious incidents of violence at school. These similarities suggest that international experience of prevention measures can also be regarded as having relevance for the situation in Sweden. Which violence prevention strategies, then, does the (primarily American) research point to?

Four research-based proposals for violence prevention work

The National Council's review of the international knowledge base presents a picture that first and foremost advocates the use of measures that are based on a well-grounded overview of the nature of the problems specific to a given school. There is a risk that even tried, tested and evaluated prevention measures will not work at an optimal level if the school management is not aware of the nature of the conflicts that exist at a given school or of the opportunities available to combat the problems that exist. In a situation such as this, an action plan can at best be something to turn to once the damage has already been done. In order to maximise adults' chances of finding out about the problems that exist among students in advance, e.g. which of them have been exposed to threats and bullying and who has threatened to take revenge etc., the research literature emphasises the importance of a school climate characterised by a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect among all those present in the school environment.

Research shows that rigid and punitive strategies to combat violence and order problems may even be counter-productive. They often serve as an obstacle to the opportunities for developing a climate of trust and communication between youths and adults. The research, and also the students and the school staff whom the Council has interviewed, point out that if adults' reactions are not experi-

enced as being sympathetic to students, there is a risk that valuable information will be lost. If the outcome of conversations with adults is perceived as being excessively harsh, youngsters' unwillingness to appear to be "snitches" will outweigh any willingness to be forthcoming with information. A reasonable basic requirement for violence prevention measures is therefore that they have a positive effect on the likelihood that school managements receive the information they need to act preventively. Against this background, the proposed measures described in the research literature can be condensed into the following four principles.

1. Schools should continuously work to combat bullying and other forms of violence

The occurrence of bullying and humiliating behaviour does not simply produce a hotbed for incidents of serious violence, which the National Council's own analysis has shown, but rather also sends a signal that adults are not capable of providing the help students need with important problems. This in turn results in an increased risk that youngsters will choose not to turn to adults. Routine problems with threats and violence should therefore be taken seriously and dealt with in a way that increases confidence between children and adults. It is essential that this work is continuously followed up, evaluated and developed in line with a given school's current problems and resources.

2. Create and maintain a sense of emotional attachment to the school

It is important that students feel like participants in all aspects of school life. Schools are not only places where students learn important subjects, but are also places where a wide range of people interact socially with one another. What is essential here is that those who are present at school have a collective sense of responsibility for maintaining a safe school environment.

3. Ensure reliable communication channels between students and adults in schools

In many of the most serious cases of school violence, students have had advance information that could have been acted on by adults. Action plans or threat assessment instruments will always be ineffective if those who make decisions are not privy to information concerning what is likely to happen. Research clearly points to the importance of the effective dissemination of information within the school. This requires effective channels of communication between students and adults, including the professional groups that work in schools. These channels of communication must of course be based on a foundation of trust. Information should also be continuously gathered regarding the effectiveness of this work and on how communication might be improved further.

4. Introduce a systematic threat assessment model

When the school management has created a communication system to ensure that they become aware of important information, it is essential that this information is dealt with in a structured fashion. The research literature often argues that schools should organise a systematic threat assessment process which sets out what is to be done, by whom, based on the seriousness of a given problem. If a threat is assessed to be serious, the school management should already have in place a prearranged strategy for e.g. collaborating with other relevant agencies. Given that it is important to react quickly, but also correctly, when serious threats and violent situations arise, the measures to be taken should be specified in an action plan. The important work of evaluating what happened in the wake of a crisis situation will also be greatly improved if there is an action plan in place that can be used for the purposes of comparison. Clearly, any action plan should be continuously developed in a dialogue with both students and all staff-

ing groups at the school, so that it is firmly anchored at all levels throughout the school.

Conditions at Swedish schools are positive from a violence prevention perspective

Much of the work carried out in Swedish schools already corresponds to many of the recommendations described in the international research literature as being important for successful violence prevention work. Sweden was one of the first countries in the world to identify the importance of working to reduce violations of personal integrity in schools. Since 2006, for example, Swedish schools have been required to formulate what are referred to as equal-treatment plans. The importance of working with the communicational climate, as well as with the promotion of school safety in its broadest sense, is also widely known. This emerged clearly in the National Council's interviews with students, teachers and others who work in the Swedish school system. At the same time, our interview participants emphasised the importance of not resting on one's laurels. Schools are continuously taking in new groups of students, and the composition of the school staff also changes over time. Creating confidence between students and adults is a continuous process and is part of the everyday life of any school. This work provides some of the professional rewards associated with working in school but it also constitutes a very tough challenge. There are therefore a large number of important issues that must be dealt with if the work of violence prevention is to be developed and improved upon.

Focus on the central role of school management and the school organisation

In the National Council's interviews with students, teachers and other members of staff, it was found that school managers had an important role in creating a culture that reduces the risk of violence. This could relate to anything from how people deal with one another on a daily basis to schools' concrete efforts to develop action plans. A lack of knowledge and tools when it comes to responding to threatening situations should not be accepted by those who work in schools. Ensuring that this competence exists and is developed is the responsibility of both school management and the responsible school authority. Although the interview participants did not view violence as constituting part of their daily school experience, there was nonetheless agreement on the importance of having a continuous discussion about questions relating to violence. A majority of those interviewed felt this was something that is currently lacking in schools. A good point of departure for improving this situation is that school leaders chart and identify their own schools' specific needs.

It also emerged in the interviews that that there were certain differences between different groups in schools, both regarding the perception of the problems that exist, and views on how schools should work to prevent violence and to deal with the violent situations that arise. These differences may in part be explained by the fact that schools are a very heterogeneous meeting place with different types of interface between the different groups that are present. This makes it even more important to work towards a school-wide, common approach to the work of combating violence and to dealing with those incidents which may nonetheless arise despite these efforts. To arrive at a prevention programme on which students, teachers, student health workers and other members of staff are all agreed requires schools to actively increase the number of contact channels between the groups that are present in school and to create space for this work in the context of the school's everyday activities.

From a preventive perspective more emphasis should be placed on working to establish good relations with students

The participants at the National Council's interviews felt that there was seldom time at their school or in certain cases even any encouragement to work with methods that inspire confidence between students and adults. Both students and teachers called for a greater focus on prevention work involving the creation and development of relationships. There is a widespread perception that this kind of work is viewed as less important and that it is therefore made subordinate to the explicit role of the school as a place for conveying knowledge. Another example is found in the results of the principals' questionnaire, where the majority of respondents felt that it is difficult to involve parents in the work of the school. Participants at the National Council's interviews also described this absence of parents and a lack of communication between parents and schools. From a criminological perspective, different forms of informal social control constitute a central element in successful crime prevention.

As was indicated in the National Council's review of the research, the communicational climate in schools is central to the success of any threat assessment efforts. However, if schools do not maintain and develop an environment where students, parents, teachers, other staff members and principals can meet, but rather simply note the disinterest of certain groups, this in itself indicates a situation where communication is not as good as it could be. Obviously, schools cannot force parents into active participation, but there are no doubt a range of creative solutions for improving the poor communication between schools and students' parents identified by school managers. This requires schools to devote both time and effort to improving the situation.

The presence of adults is important

Closely linked to the work of relationship building is the presence of adults where youngsters actually are. From both our study of assaults reported to the police and our interviews with students, it is clear that the active presence of adults works to reduce violence. Adults who take the time to talk to students and to spend time in the same areas of school as the students have a calming effect on certain situations and convey a message to students that they are valued. The experiences described in the interviews indicate the same thing; an adult presence provides a sense of security and reduces tension in a school. At the same time, it also emerged from the interviews that there was a lack of agreement at some schools regarding how an adult presence should be organised in practice and that an adult presence is also linked to a certain level of exposure and of vulnerability for members of staff. To enhance the safety of staff members and to ensure that an adult presence functions as intended, school employees need better training and skills to cope with the situations that arise. These are questions which need to be discussed at every school so that a school environment and work-situation can be developed that is acceptable to everyone.

An adult presence at school can be understood as both a social and a situational prevention measure. From a situational perspective, the physical school environment can also have a preventive effect, with the accessibility of adults and their degree of involvement also being dependant on how a school's premises are designed and organised.

It is important that the school is part of the solution

In line with a growing awareness of the situation of young people, and a decrease in tolerance towards violence in general, the question of how schools view, or should view the violence that takes place at school has attracted both attention and debate. On the basis of the special circumstances in which school

violence takes place – i.e. that it often involves young perpetrators and victims who will continue to come into contact with one another regularly for a long period of time, and who will start doing so only a short time after a violent incident has taken place – much of the debate has focused on how schools can best deal with such incidents. Another factor associated with school violence is that such incidents also affect other people at the school who have not themselves been directly involved in the violence.

What the debate has united people on is that it is important that acts of violence result in immediate consequences and are not allowed to pass unnoticed. There is no agreement however on what form these consequences should take for differing types of violent incidents. A number of the arguments in the debate have expressed the view that schools should not represent an exception in society, that crimes committed in school should be called crimes and that these incidents should be dealt with by those best qualified to investigate crime, namely the police. Against the background of this debate, some have implemented zero-tolerance strategies, in the form of reporting all violent incidents to the police, and some have initiated collaborations between schools, local authorities, social services and police and introduced these into the everyday work of their schools.

This report shows that the majority of incidents of school violence that are reported to the police are of a less serious nature. In combination with the fact that the resources of the justice system are limited, this means that the violence that occurs at school rarely leads to any form of immediate reaction from the justice system. Achieving the prompt and adequate response that is necessary for the creation of a safe school environment will thus normally require the school itself to assume responsibility for resolving the situation that has arisen. Simply reporting an incident to the police can never be regarded as a solution to the conflicts, bullying and violence that take place at school.

In the interview study, it emerged that schools may be in need of external support when more serious violent incidents occur, but also that schools have valuable knowledge about the youths involved which, if used correctly, can lead to an effective solution for all of the parties concerned. This requires the existence of a structure for the distribution of responsibility both within schools and between schools, parents and other agencies. By extension, schools' working practices in relation to different forms of violence are also of significance for the level of confidence that students, parents, members of staff, and also the general public have in the school system as a social institution.