

SUMMARY

English summary of Brå report No 2007:30

Youth and crime in the Swedish counties 1995–2005

brå

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The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention – 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.

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Foreword

Youth crime attracts a great deal of attention in the crime policy debate. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention is often asked to respond to questions relating to both the extent of youth crime, and how it has changed over time. Unfortunately, these are not always easy questions to answer. Producing a picture of the crimes that young people have committed or been exposed to requires the use of several different sources. Official crime statistics constitute one such source that has long been used by crime researchers. One major advantage with data on the number of youths suspected of offences, for example, is that they can be studied both over time and in terms of their geographical distribution. It is well known, however, that the number of youths who become registered as suspects in connection with crime accounts for only a small proportion of those youths who actually commit various types of criminal offences over the course of a given year. In order to produce a better description of youth offending, researchers therefore often employ questionnaire surveys, in which young people are themselves asked to report their experiences of involvement in crime under conditions of anonymity.

The National Council for Crime Prevention administers a nationally representative self-report study of crime among youth in their final year of compulsory education which has been conducted in Sweden every second year since 1995. The survey constitutes an important source of data in relation to assessments of the state of youth crime in Sweden. The latest in a series of reports based on the school survey was published towards the end of 2006. The publication of the report gave rise to a large number of questions, not least from a variety of actors whose interest was focused primarily on the situation at the local rather than the national level. Many were interested for example in the question of whether the trend over time at the national level was reflected in the trend for various municipalities, cities or counties. Another common question was that of whether the amount of youth crime varied between different parts of the country.

The nature of this response pointed to a gap that the National Council's presentation of the national school survey findings had left in the knowledge, since to date we had not presented these findings broken down on the basis of the respondents' geographical location. The National Council hopes that this new report will provide an answer to at least some of the questions that have been posed.

The target groups for the report include the Government and Parliament, justice system and social services employees, and others with an interest in youth issues. The report has been written by Li Eriksson, a research analyst at the National Council, and Felipe Estrada, Head of the Council's Research and Development Division. Jonas Ring Ph.D., of Stockholm University's Department of Criminology, has made valuable comments on the report.

In conclusion, we would like to extend our thanks to all the school leaders and teachers who have assisted us in conducting the survey and of course to all the young people who have shared their experiences with us.

Stockholm, March 2008

Jan Andersson
Director General

Felipe Estrada
Head of Division

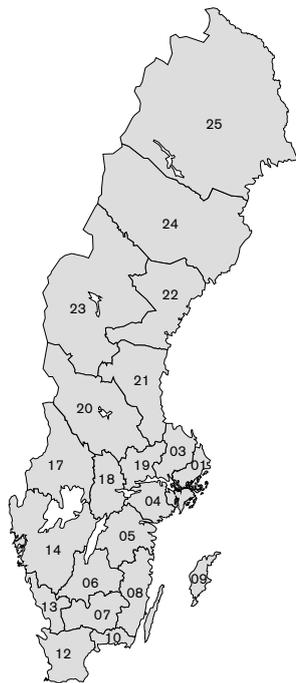
Introduction

Sweden has long maintained and published an extensive range of official crime statistics that provide the opportunity to analyse both the extent of crime and trends in crime over time. It is important to remember however that official crime statistics only reflect those crimes that are detected and reported to the police (Brå 2006b). The majority of the crimes committed in society are never brought to the attention of the criminal justice system (Brå 2007a). Analyses of the crime structure and of crime trends that are based on crime statistics must therefore take changes in reporting propensities and clearance rates into consideration. In order to get a picture of what is often referred to as “hidden criminality”, additional methods are required. One well-tried method involves asking people direct questions about their involvement in and exposure to crime.

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention is responsible for the administration of a national school survey, in which students in their final year of compulsory education (year nine) complete a questionnaire on their own involvement in crime and problem behaviour, and their exposure to crime, under conditions of anonymity. The survey has been conducted every second year between 1995 and 2005 and the data collected provide an opportunity to analyse and describe both the structure of youth crime and trends in youth crime over the course of an entire decade.

Objectives and research questions

The results from the different waves of the national school survey have been published in several reports from the National Council (most recently in Brå 2006a). The analyses presented have focused exclusively on the situation at the national level, however. What has to date been missing is a good measure of the extent to which youth crime varies across the country. When the latest report was published it became clear that there was a great deal of interest in the publication of an analysis of this kind. Furthermore, the national school survey allows for such a study since it contains information on the counties in which the respondents live.



County	Population size	15-year-olds
01 Stockholm	1 814 191	20 266
03 Uppsala	295 348	3 740
04 Södermanland	258 247	3 349
05 Östergötland	414 048	5 132
06 Jönköping	328 498	4 382
07 Kronoberg	178 060	2 289
08 Kalmar	237 098	3 063
09 Gotland	57 613	797
10 Blekinge	150 877	1 855
12 Skåne	1 134 644	13 748
13 Halland	276 180	3 621
14 Västra Götaland	1 499 802	18 435
17 Värmland	276 727	3 404
18 Örebro	274 362	3 427
19 Västmanland	259 134	3 242
20 Dalarna	280 641	3 707
21 Gävleborg	280 616	3 457
22 Västernorrland	248 977	3 054
23 Jämtland	130 360	1 653
24 Västerbotten	257 292	3 333
25 Norrbotten	257 547	3 276

Source: Statistics Sweden

Figure 1. Map of the counties of Sweden showing annual average population size for the period 1995–2005.

The overarching objective of the current study is to describe and compare, at the level of individual counties, the proportions of pupils in year nine who report involvement in various types of crime, the proportions who report exposure to different types of crime, and the trends followed by these measures over the period 1995 to 2005. The principal questions addressed by the study are as follows:

- What differences are visible between the level of involvement in youth crime at the national level and that found in different counties? Are there counties that systematically present lower or higher levels of involvement in youth crime than the national average?
- What is the nature of the trend in involvement in crime over the years 1995 – 2005? Are there counties that deviate from the national trend?

Data and method

The national school survey has been conducted every second year between 1995 and 2005. The first two waves of the survey were conducted by the Department of Criminology at the University of Stockholm, after which responsibility for the survey was taken over by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention. The survey is conducted among Swedish youths in year nine, who complete a questionnaire asking them amongst other things about their own involvement in and exposure to crime over the past twelve months.

The sample is based on Statistics Sweden's (SCB's) register of school classes and schools in Sweden. These registers were used as the basis for a systematic sampling procedure. The surveys conducted in 1995 and 1997 were based on a

sample of year nine classes, while the remaining surveys were based on samples of schools which included year nine classes.¹ The total number of students participating in the survey has varied between 5,265 and 8,203 individuals, with an external non-response level of between five and fourteen percent (Brå 2006a:13). This non-response level is based on the number of pupils in participating classes and is for the most part comprised of students who were absent from school at the time of the survey. For a more detailed presentation of the survey methods, see *Youths and crime 1995–2005* (Brå 2007b).

For the purposes of this report, the period 1995 – 2005 has been divided up into three measurement points: 1995/97, 1999/2001 and 2003/05. The values presented for each measurement point are thus the mean values of two years' data and reflect the proportion of year nine youth who have committed a certain type of offence over the course of a year. The reason for combining the data in this way is to increase the number of respondents representing the individual counties. In spite of the use of this procedure, the number of respondents from the county of Gotland remains too small, and the county has therefore had to be excluded from the analysis. The majority of the counties are represented by at least 300 respondents per measurement point. The smallest number of respondents is found in the county of Jämtland (189 pupils for the years 1999/2001) and the largest number in Stockholm county (2,599 students for the years 1999/2001).²

Given the substantial variation between the various counties in the number of respondents, statistical tests are employed to specify the probability that differences found in the data both between the individual counties and the national average, and within the individual counties over time, represent real differences.³ This means that in those counties where fewer students have participated, larger changes over time, or a more substantial deviation from the national average will be required for the reported difference to be regarded as statistically significant. By contrast, smaller differences are required to produce statistically significant findings in relation to the metropolitan counties, where the number of participating students is greater.

Findings

Self-reported youth crime

During the period between 1995 and 2005, 57.6 percent of Sweden's year nine youth reported having committed a theft offence over the course of a year, while 36.4 percent reported having committed an act of vandalism and 18.1 percent some form of violent act.⁴ The variation across different counties is not particularly great. The difference between the counties presenting the highest and lowest figures respectively is slightly over ten percentage points for each of the offence categories examined. Although certain counties do present levels that are significantly higher or lower than the national average in relation to individual crime categories, only a handful of counties deviate systematically across all three categories of offences (see Figure 2). One such county is Västernorrland in north-

¹ This change in the sampling procedure employed was due to a change in the register maintained by Statistics Sweden, which from the time of the 1999 data collection only contained information on schools, and no longer on school classes.

² For more detailed information, the reader is referred to the National Council's report: Brå 2007:30 (Brå 2007c).

³ Statistical significance is tested using the chi-square test, with an alpha level of 5%.

⁴ The students' participation in crime is measured by means of questionnaire items relating to fourteen different types of theft, four types of vandalism and six types of acts of violence; see Brå 2007c.

eastern Sweden. Levels of self-reported involvement in crime are lower here than the national average irrespective of the offence category examined. This is also the case in the county of Jönköping in southern Sweden. For two of the country's eastern counties, Västmanland and Stockholm, the situation is the reverse. Here the proportion of students reporting involvement in crime is higher than the national average across all three categories of offences.

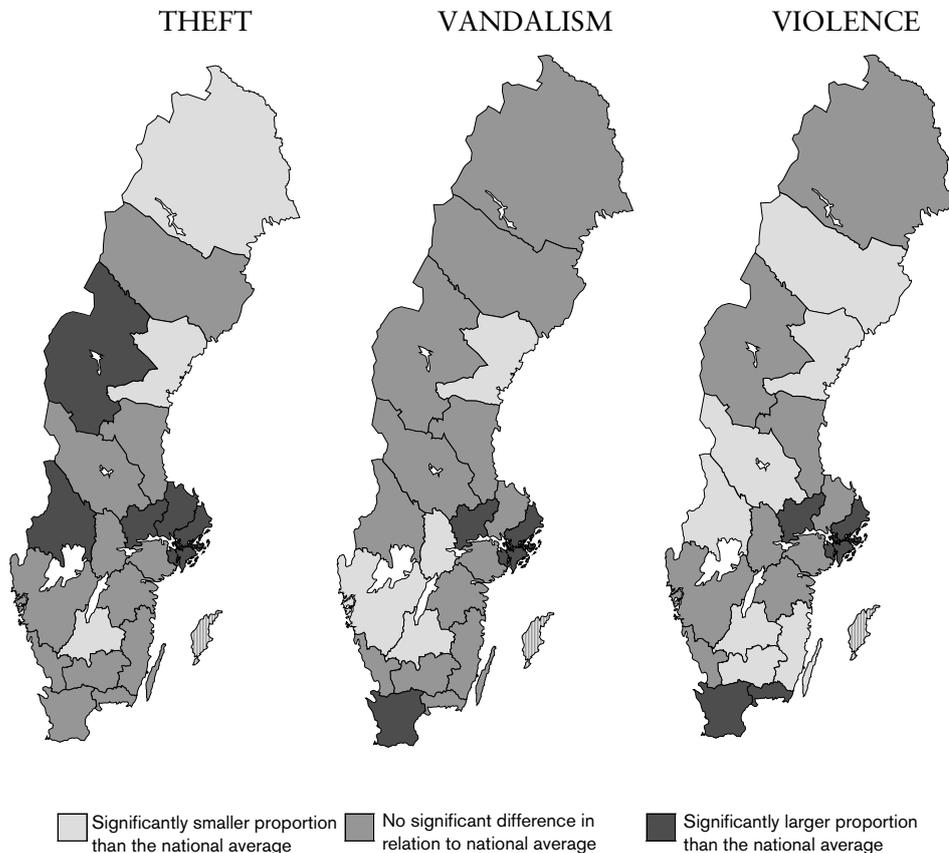


Figure 2. Proportion of youths reporting having committed theft offences, vandalism offences and violent offences respectively, 1995–2005.

As regards the trend over time, there is a clear decline at the national level in the proportion of youths reporting having committed theft and vandalism offences during the period examined, see Figure 3. In general, this trend is also visible in the majority of the individual counties. The counties of Dalarna and Västmanland in central Sweden stand out in the sense that they show no change in relation to either theft or vandalism offences. As regards the proportion of youths reporting involvement in violent crime, no marked reduction corresponding to that noted in relation to theft and vandalism is visible. At the national level, there is no more than a slight decline in the level of participation in violent offences. This decline is sufficient to achieve statistical significance in the counties of Värmland, Jönköping, Skåne and Stockholm. It is notable that over the period 1995 – 2005, none of the counties of Sweden are characterised by a statistically significant increase in the proportion of youths reporting involvement in theft, vandalism or violent offences.

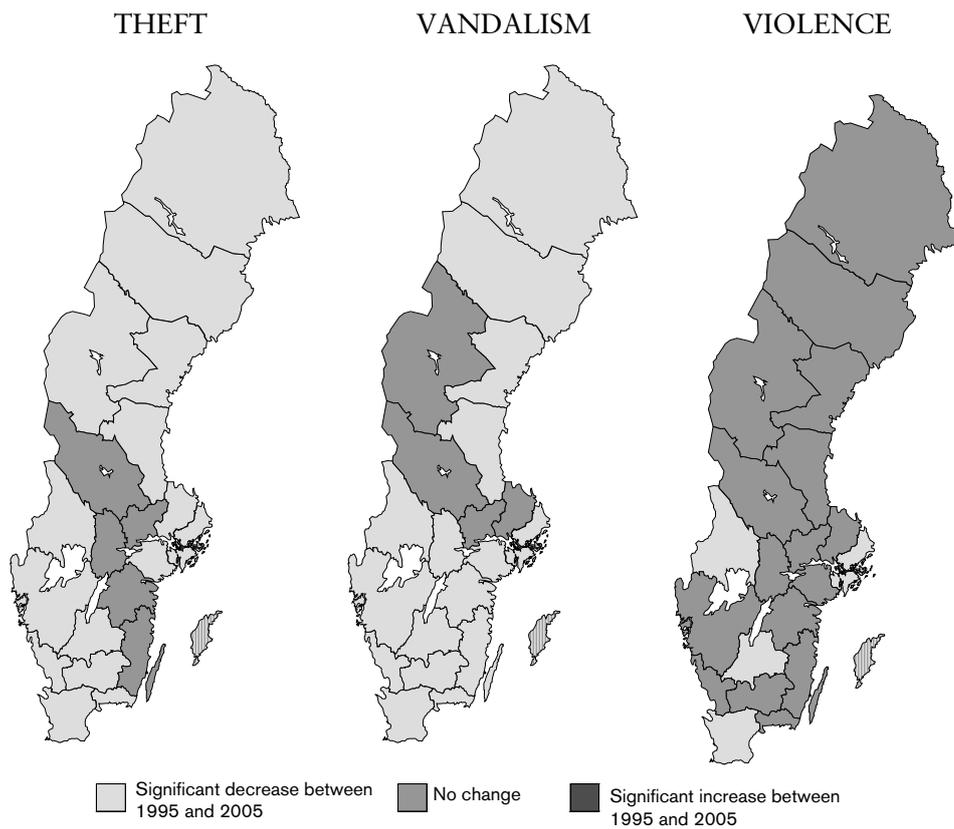


Figure 3. Trend over time in the proportion of youths reporting involvement in theft offences, vandalism offences or violent offences between 1995 and 2005.

Youth exposure to crime

Of year nine youth in Sweden, 30.8 percent report that they have had something stolen from them and 14.5 percent report having been subjected to serious violence or threats. Here too, the differences between the individual counties are relatively minor. As regards the proportion exposed to theft crime, the difference between the counties presenting the lowest and highest levels respectively lies at fourteen percentage points. The variation is half this size in relation to the proportions reporting exposure to violence. Figure 4 shows that by comparison with the remainder of the country, the counties of Norrbotten, Västernorrland and Dalarna (in northern and central Sweden respectively) present lower levels of victimisation in relation to both these categories of crime, whereas Sweden's most southerly county, Skåne, instead presents higher than average victimisation levels.

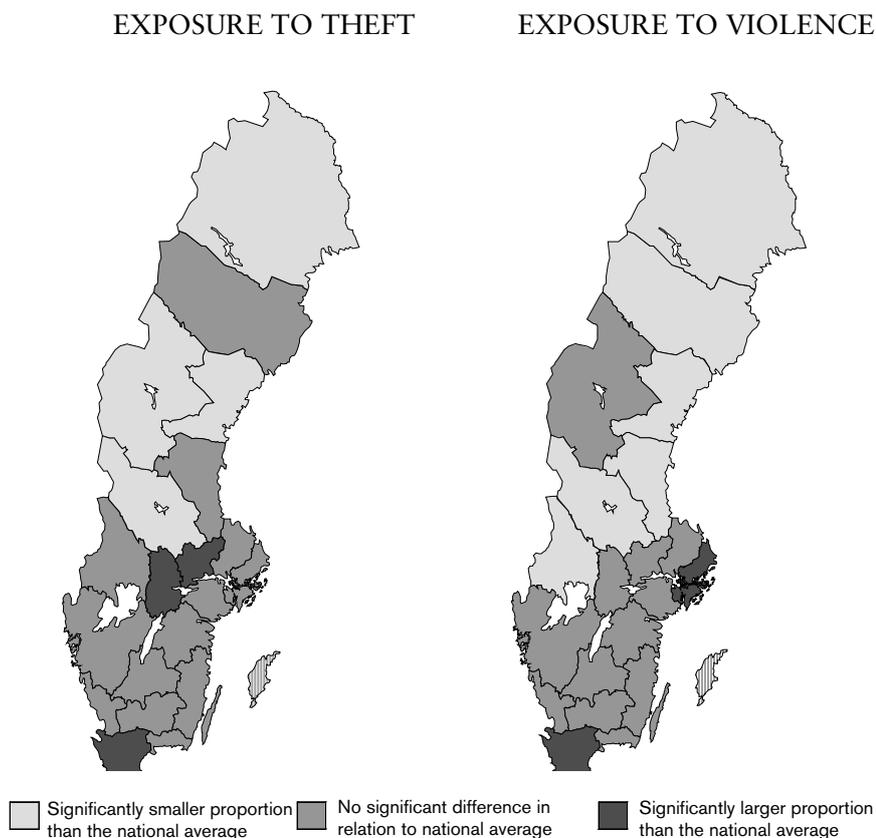


Figure 4. Proportion of youths reporting having been exposed to theft and violent offences respectively, 1995–2005.

Shifting the focus of the analysis to the trend over time in exposure to thefts and violence in Sweden, the proportion of year nine students reporting victimisation at the national level has remained stable during the period between 1995 and 2005 for both types of crime (see Figure 5). At the level of the individual counties, exposure to theft crime has increased in the counties of Uppsala and Östergötland, whereas there has been a decrease in the county of Jämtland in north-western Sweden. Three of the counties in southern Sweden have witnessed a decrease in the proportion of youth reporting exposure to violent offences: Kronoberg, Halland and Skåne. There has been an increase however in Sweden's most northerly county, Norrbotten.

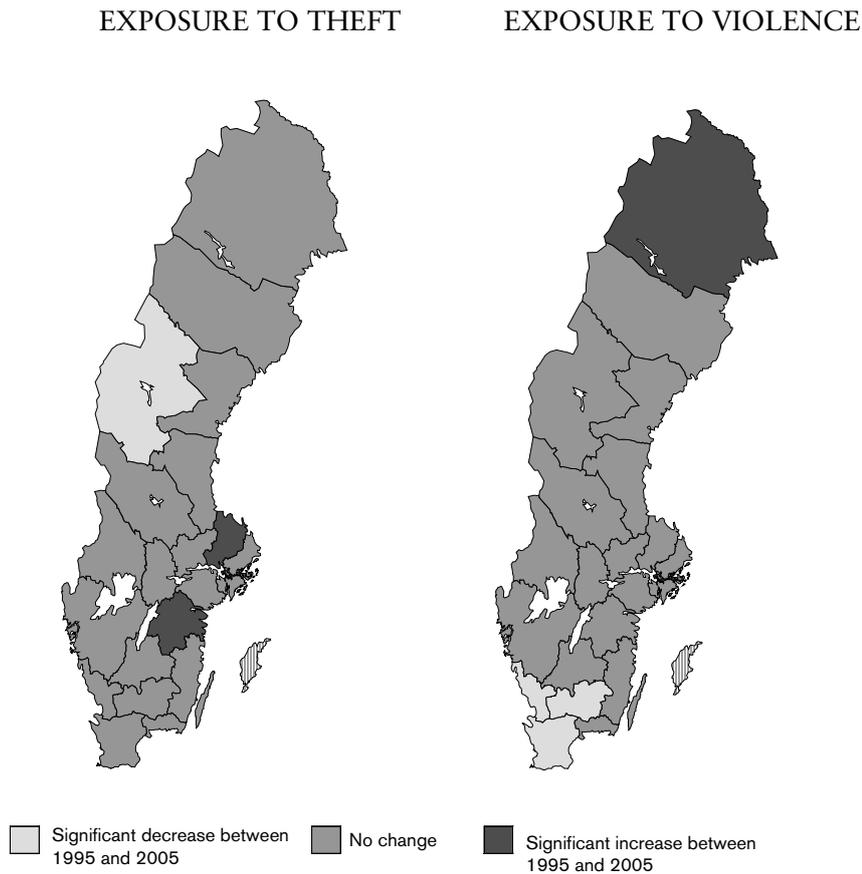


Figure 5. Trend over time in the proportion of youth reporting exposure to theft and violent offences respectively between 1995 and 2005.

Youths' experiences of bullying

Among year nine youth in Sweden, 10.8 percent report that they have been bullied repeatedly. The proportion of students who report having bullied others lies at 11.5 percent. Differences between the counties are small, and at most reach six percentage points. Figure 6 shows the counties that present levels of bullying that deviate significantly from the national average. Two counties present levels of both exposure to and participation in bullying that differ significantly from the national average. In the county of Norrland in the most northern part of Sweden the proportion of youths with experience of bullying is lower than the national average, whereas bullying appears to constitute a more widespread problem in the county of Skåne in southern Sweden.

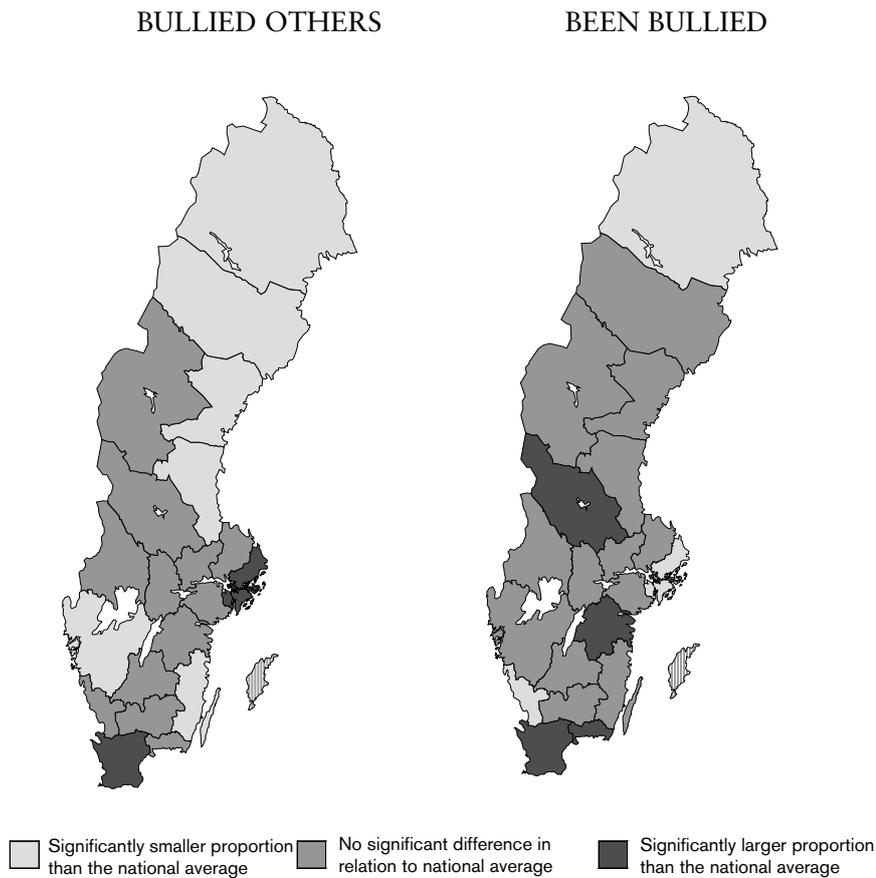


Figure 6. Proportion of year nine youths who report that they have bullied others or have themselves been bullied, 1995–2005.

Over the course of the period 1995–2005 the proportion of year nine youth with experience of bullying has remained stable (see Figure 7). The majority of counties reflect this stable trend found at the national level. In the county of Jönköping in southern Sweden there has been a decrease in the proportion of students reporting that they have bullied others, whereas in the east coast county of Uppsala there has been an increase. The county of Kronoberg in the south of Sweden has also witnessed an increase, not in the proportion of youths reporting having bullied others however, but rather in the proportion reporting that they have themselves been bullied.

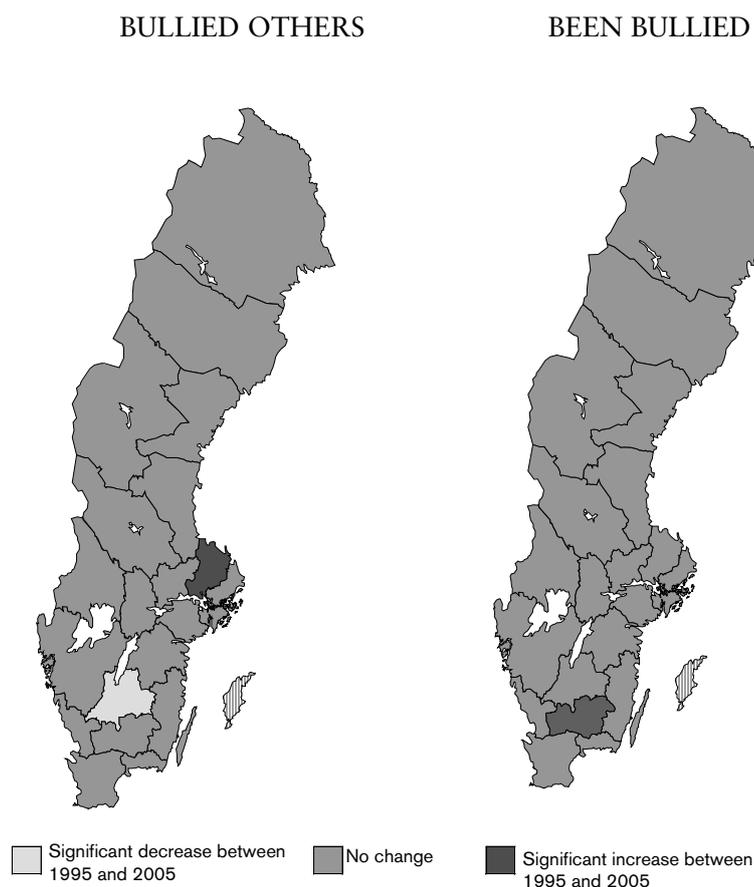


Figure 7. Trend over time in the proportion of youths reporting they have bullied others or have themselves been bullied (1995–2005).

Concluding discussion

The overarching objective of the study presented above has been to present county-level comparisons of on the one hand the size of the proportions of Swedish year nine youth reporting participation in or exposure to various types of crime during the period 1995 to 2005, and on the other the trends followed by these measures over the course of the period examined. The study also presents corresponding measures in relation to bullying. By examining differences in levels and trends in youth crime across the different counties of Sweden, it becomes possible to identify counties that show systematic signs of a less favourable situation in relation to youth crime.

The general picture presented by the report is that the proportion of youths committing theft and vandalism offences has declined significantly in the major-

ity of counties. As regards year nine youths' experiences of violent crime and bullying, these have remained more or less stable over the period covered by the study.

Looking more closely at the trends in theft and vandalism at the level of the individual counties, it is interesting to note that the counties of Dalarna and Västmanland are not characterised by a significant decrease over the period, and thus stand out in relation to the remainder of the country. As regards violent offending, there have been significant reductions in the proportions reporting participation in violent crime in two of Sweden's metropolitan counties, namely Stockholm and Skåne. With the exception of the county of Uppsala, where a larger proportion of year nine youth report having bullied others at the end of the period, none of the counties present statistically significant increases in levels of participation in either violent offending or bullying over the period examined.

The trend in youths' exposure to theft and violent crime has been relatively stable across all Swedish counties. It is notable that none of the metropolitan counties have witnessed an increase, and in the county of Skåne there has even been a decrease in the proportion of year nine youth reporting having been exposed to threats or more serious acts of violence. The same trend is visible in relation to exposure to bullying. Here the trend has remained stable across all of the counties of Sweden with the exception of the county of Kronoberg, which has witnessed an increase.

One of the report's main objectives has been to examine whether the level of self-reported participation in youth crime varies substantially across different Swedish counties. At least two conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the analyses presented above. Firstly, it is clear that for the most part there are no major differences in the proportion of youths who have participated in or been exposed to crime when the question is examined using a geographical division based on county borders. The variations that do emerge often involve differences of no more than a few percentage points, with certain counties presenting slightly higher proportions of youths reporting experiences of crime than the remainder. At the same time, the second important conclusion that can be drawn on the basis of the report's findings is that there are a small number of counties where the youth crime situation differs systematically from that found in the remainder of the country.

As regards participation in crime, year nine youth in the counties of Västernorrland and Jönköping systematically report lower levels of participation, whereas the counties of Västmanland and Stockholm are systematically characterised by higher proportions of year nine youth reporting participation in theft, vandalism and violent offences.

When the focus is shifted to an examination of levels of exposure to crime, Västernorrland once again emerges as an area where smaller proportions of youth report experiences of theft and violent crime. Year nine youth in the counties of Norrbotten and Dalarna also report significantly lower levels of exposure to these types of crime in relation to the national average. In Skåne, by contrast, the proportion of youths reporting exposure to crime is systematically higher than that found in the remaining Swedish counties, and it is thus in this county that the most victimized youths are to be found. This becomes even clearer when the level of bullying is taken into consideration, since in this regard it is the students in the counties of Skåne, Blekinge, Dalarna and Östergötland that appear to experience the most extensive levels of victimization. The lowest levels of bullying are reported in the counties of Norrbotten, Stockholm and Halland.

The differences identified inevitably raise questions as to what they might be a result of. Unfortunately this is no easy question to answer. The factors that are usually referred to in criminological research in order to explain variations

across geographical areas are less applicable to the study of differences at the county level. One can of course point to the fact that the metropolitan counties appear in this study to present higher levels of crime among year nine youth than the less densely populated counties, which is to be expected. Other factors referred to in the research as being of significance are the nature of the housing stock and land use, which are used as indicators of the level of concentration found in relation to shops, places of public entertainment, blocks of flats etc. A high concentration of such areas increases the risk for a variety of types of crime. In addition, factors such as the composition of the population, the socio-economic structure and patterns of migration into and out of an area are also important since they provide an indication of the prevalence of groups presenting higher and lower levels of risk for both victimization and participation in crime.

All of these explanatory factors are suited to smaller geographical areas than an entire county however. Quite simply, the significance of an area for individuals' involvement in or exposure to crime is best studied on the basis of the structure of the specific neighbourhood where a given individual lives. When an analysis is conducted on the basis of counties rather than municipalities, or even better town or city districts, it becomes more difficult to exclusively attribute any differences found to people's living conditions, since the occurrence of most of the explanatory factors described above will only vary to a relatively minor extent across different counties. The fact that we have nonetheless chosen to proceed from a geographical division based on counties is related to the fact that it is not possible to conduct the analyses presented in the report on the basis of a geographical division at the municipal level, for example. The question of the significance of the residential neighbourhood for exposure to crime is one which we intend to return to in future studies however.

Our hope is that the regional description of different forms of youth crime that we have nonetheless been able to present in the current report will serve as an important addition to the knowledge available to crime prevention work at the local level, and that the local discussions that result from the publication of the report will produce interesting ideas about possible explanations that can then be tested empirically.

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