How could Sweden put an end to its deadly wave of gang crime?

Richard Orange - richard.orange@thelocal.com
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Sweden is still reeling from Saturday's fatal shooting in Stockholm, with politicians in a debate on Tuesday suggesting tough policies to end gang violence. What actually works, according to the research?

Increasing the number and length of prison sentences

Both the current right-wing and former centre-left government have argued that putting more gang members in prison will reduce gang crime.

The Tidö Agreement between the three government parties and the far-right Sweden Democrats includes pledges to double punishments for gang crime, to end the *mängdrabatt* system where those convicted of multiple crimes do not serve the full sentence for each, to tighten parole laws, and to create youth prisons.

In total, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service estimates that the new policies will require the number of prison places in Sweden to double from 7,500 to around 15,000.

In April, Justice Minister Gunnar Strömmer proposed doubling the minimum penalty for gun crimes and increasing the maximum penalty, arguing that this would push gang criminals to reduce shootings.

His predecessor Morgan Johansson also argued that putting gang members behind bars prevented the imprisoned individuals from committing crime, prevented them from recruiting youth criminals, and also allowed more time to rehabilitate them.

But is any of this true?

It's close to a consensus among criminologists that putting people in prison does not reduce reoffending, and may even increase it. A meta analysis of 116 studies carried out by researchers at University of Chicago found that the evidence was so strong that the "null effect of custodial compared with noncustodial sanctions is considered a 'criminological fact'".

Felipe Estrada, Professor in Criminology and department head at Stockholm University, told The Local that Sweden's own experience over the past decade had already demonstrated the failure of this approach.

"What we see right now in Sweden is that extra resources given to the police, the police arresting more people and more people being sent to jail, has not been the end to the violence," he said.

Longer prison sentences, he said, did not seem to deter young men from engaging in violent gang crime.

"If you look at the research evidence, it doesn't give you much hope that deterrence will work. That's one thing we're pretty sure of. Those young men who are involved in these shootings aren't even deterred by the fact that they could next week be the victims of lethal violence."

As for the idea that putting people behind bars prevents them from committing additional crimes – the so-called incapacitation argument – the problem is that the rewards from Sweden's illegal narcotics market are so high that new criminals quickly take their places, often after a violent conflict.

"When it comes to incapacitation effects, the evidence there is that it's a rather expensive and ineffective way of preventing crime that has not been committed," Estrada said. "What we know is that you have to increase imprisonment in huge numbers to get small effects."

Tougher sentencing can also have unintended consequences. There are signs, for instance, that the former government's decision to end reduced sentences for 18-year-olds has led gang criminals in Sweden to instead use 15 and 16-year-olds to carry out shootings.

Finally, the idea that longer sentences means more time for rehabilitation is, according to Estrada, "really shaky".

The prison services in Sweden already have next to no resources to work on rehabilitation, and they fear an even worse situation with prison overcrowding in the near future.

"There are a lot of things going on now which go in exactly the opposite direction of rehabilitation," Estrada said.

Zero tolerance policing

The new government's plans to bring in stop-and-search zones, or *visitationszoner,* fits into the category of zero tolerance policing, the idea that police can win back control over areas with crime problems by increasing the police presence, stopping and searching people, and arresting people for even minor offences, such as the possession of small amounts of drugs.

The idea with stop-and-search zones is to allow police to temporarily create areas where they can stop and search whoever they like without reasonable suspicion of a crime.

According to Estrada, this strategy has repeatedly been shown to be counterproductive, as it undermines the legitimacy and trust police need to carry out their work effectively in vulnerable areas.

"It's a good example of something you shouldn't do if you want more effective policework," he said, adding that police in Sweden can already carry out such searches if they have a reasonable suspicion.

"We know from research that they do it mostly against young men with immigrant backgrounds, so to lower the threshold for when police can do this will only increase discrimination against certain groups and so decrease the trust and legitimacy that the police need to be effective."

A similar counterproductive policy is the current government's plan to reduce the age of criminal responsibility, a policy Denmark has reversed in the face of the evidence.

"We know from research that if we bring more kids into the criminal justice system, this will increase the risk of them becoming criminal, because their success rate in schools will decrease," Estrada said. "They are losing time, they are stigmatised, they meet other kids with more difficulties than they have. To treat a 14-year-old the same way as you treat a 20-year-old is not a good strategy."

So if the strategies above aren't likely to work, what are?

Estrada breaks the strategies down into "things that we can do today" and "things we can do to prevent crime in the long term".

Group Violence Intervention

Group Violence Intervention, a strategy pioneered in US cities, is "promising", according to Estrada.

The strategy, which is known as *Sluta skjut* in Swedish ("stop shooting"), focuses its deterrence on criminal groups rather than individuals, with police and social workers working closely with the communities hit by crime.

Known gang criminals are called into "call-ins", meetings where they are confronted by victims of violent crimes, warned that if the violence continues, they will be targeted heavily by police and other agencies, and also offered a way out from gang crime.

The strategy has a strong record of success, and has been associated with a 63 percent reduction in youth homicide in Boston, a 37 percent reduction in homicides in the neighbourhoods where it has been applied in Chicago, and similar reductions in other US cities.

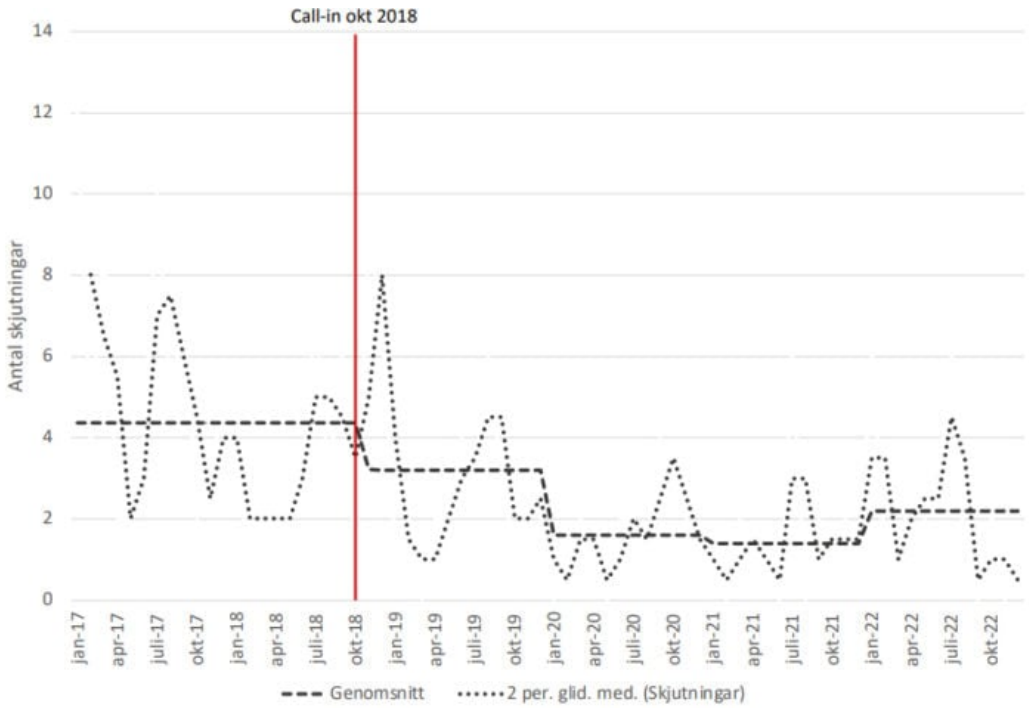
"It's of course problematic because you have to sit down with criminals, but if you want to stop violence in the short term, it's a very promising strategy." Estrada said.

The city of Malmö teamed up with the police and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service to trial the strategy between 2018 and 2020, after which the strategy has become a permanent part of police work in the region.

The strategy is now also being applied in Gothenburg, Uppsala, Örebro, the Stockholm suburbs of Huddinge and Järfälla, and in Upplands-Bro.

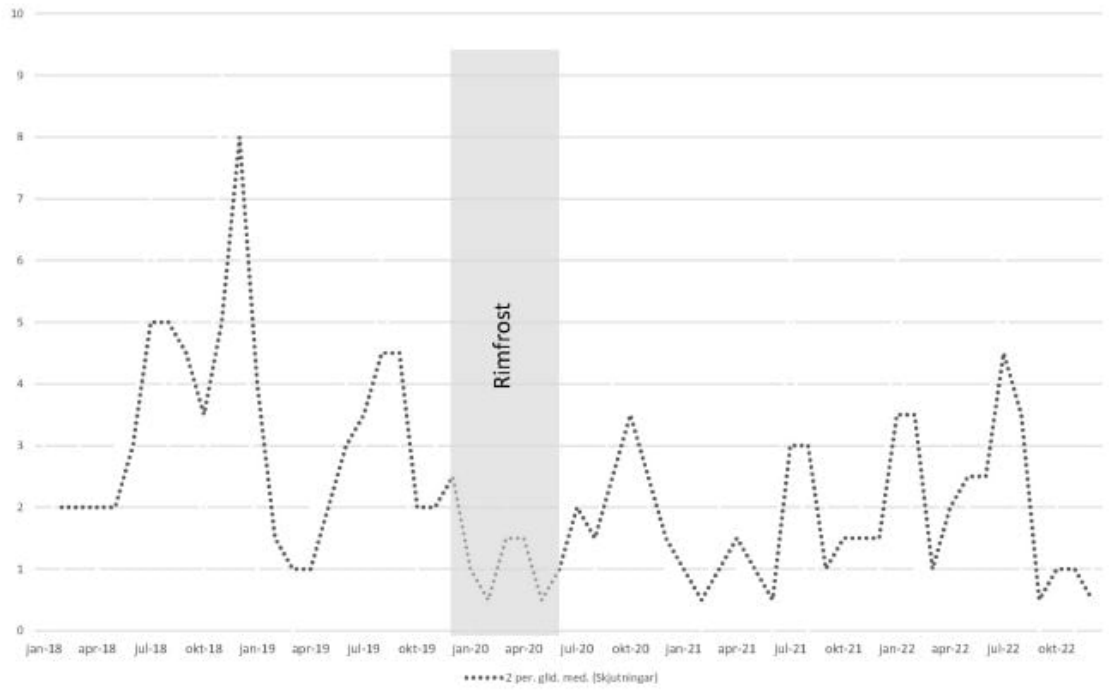
In Malmö, the strategy does seem to have had some success, according to the latest research update from Anna-Karin Ivert and Caroline Mellgren, two criminologists at Malmö University tasked with appraising the programme for the Swedish Council of Crime Prevention (Brå).

According to Ivert and Mellgren, monthly number of shootings in Malmö roughly halved from 4.36 per month between January 2017 and October 2018, when the programme launched, to 2.14 between November 2018 and December 2022.



The monthly number of shootings in Malmö before and after the Sluta skjut project was launched in 2018. Photo: Brå

There is uncertainty over how much credit the Sluta skjut project should take for this decline, as police also launched Operation Rimfrost, a special operation which saw officers dispatched to Malmö from across Sweden, between November 2019 and June 2020.



Operation Rimfrost coincided with one of the periods with the lowest number of shootings in Malmö. Photo: Brå

The Covid-19 pandemic, which reduced crime across the world, also broke out in March 2020, just a month after the trial was ended and the project in Malmö became a part of normal police and social work.

The reduction in shootings came despite the police's failure to provide adequate resources after the end of the trial period, the researchers said, with social workers frustrated at not being provided with up-to-date analysis of criminal groupings behind violent gang crime.

There were no call-ins carried out in the summer of 2022 despite an increase in deadly gun violence in Malmö.

The researchers also said that Sweden lacked, or at least did not adequately use, the civil society organisations – such as Somali

neighbourhood groups – which had been such a key part of the strategy's success in the US. Police, the researchers said, had not often not sent officers to meetings with civil society organisations, leaving this work to social workers.

Liberalising Sweden's strict drug laws

The window into Sweden's criminal world provided by the access police gained in 2020 and 2021 to the encrypted chat services Encrochat and ANOM showed clearly how much of Sweden's gang shootings are connected to control of drug smuggling routes from Denmark into Malmö, and then on to Finland and Norway, and also to local drug markets across the country.

"We know that a lot of this gun-related violence which we have seen in the last ten years in Sweden is directly related to the drug trade and competition for drug markets, so to reconsider these very peculiar Swedish laws about possession of small amounts of cannabis could be a game changer," Estrada said.

If police no longer had to search for and prosecute the possession of small amounts of cannabis, they would have more resources to combat more serious crimes, he added.

He stressed, though, that he was not necessarily advocating that Sweden liberalise drugs.

"But the least you would expect a country like Sweden to do would be to evaluate how the drug policy has worked."

Invest heavily in schools in vulnerable areas

In the longer term, the most important measure any government can take to reduce gang crime, Estrada argued, would be to invest heavily in schools.

"Every criminologist you talk with anywhere will say that schools are a crucial institution to prevent juvenile crime, because young teenagers who are successful in schools do not get into these kinds of crimes," Estrada said.

It was particularly important, he added, to improve schools in vulnerable areas.

"Targeting is always better and we know that the school system in Sweden has become more and more unequal, so we have the stronger teachers in the schools with fewer problems and less educated teachers in the schools where we would need it to be otherwise, and it's not just teachers, it's assistant teachers, activity leaders, special needs teachers, and school counsellors."

The disappointment, he argued, was that the current government was actually cutting back on the funding available to municipalities to invest in schools.

"It's paradoxical that we're in a situation where schools are getting fewer and fewer resources," he said. "Politicians talk about strengthening schools, but we know headmasters are struggling with budgets, and having to let staff go."

In the long run, cuts at schools in vulnerable areas might end up costing more money than they save, due to the cost of dealing with the social problems and crime created later on.

"Researchers will tell you that even if it costs a lot of money, it's wise to concentrate on schools." Estrada said. "Even if it sounds soft, it's not soft: it's a hard and expensive measure against juvenile crime."

What to do when what works politically does not actually cut crime?

Sweden's politicians face the same conundrum when it comes to crime as their counterparts across the world. The "tough on crime" rhetoric and policies that voters most appreciate aren't actually that effective.

"They make good soundbites and tap into the emotions people are feeling and that helps them win elections," Estrada said. "You can get a bit cynical because so much of the debate is about things that research shows doesn't work and too little is about things we know work but cost a lot of resources."