



Child rapes reported to the police

*An update and comparison
of the years 1995 and 2008*

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English summary of Brå report 2011:6

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention – a centre of knowledge on crime and measures to combat crime

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brottsförebyggande rådet – Brå) works to reduce crime and improve levels of safety by producing data and disseminating knowledge on crime, crime prevention work and the justice system's response to crime.

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Introduction

Sexual offences represent a form of crime that has particularly serious consequences for the personal and sexual integrity of those victimised. Research shows that children are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of exposure to sex crime, not least because the offences occur at a time when the victims are in the process of developing their capacities for trust and intimacy, and also their sexuality. The consequences of sex offences can thus be even more extensive and serious for children than they are for adults (e.g. Mullen and Fleming 1998, Öberg et al. 2010).

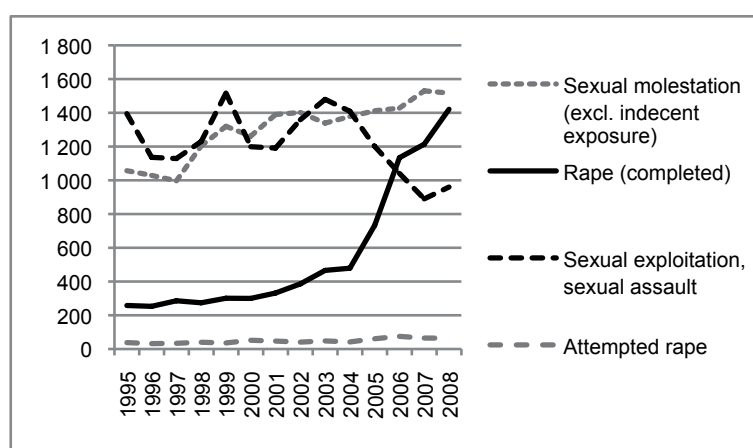
Up until the late 1970s, the sexual abuse of children was generally regarded as a rare phenomenon (Putnam 2003). This view has changed, however, as researchers have come to devote more attention to attempts to measure the prevalence of child sex offences. The research community is even today largely agreed that it is more or less impossible to definitively establish the actual prevalence of sex offences against children. Attempts at measurement are beset with substantial problems irrespective of the measurement method employed (Goldman and Padayachi 2000). In spite of these difficulties, however, a growing number of studies have been published that have allowed for scientifically based prevalence estimates (Edgardh and Ormstad 2000, Lalor and McElvaney 2010). In Sweden, studies of this kind have generally estimated that between seven and ten percent of Swedish women and 1–3 percent of Swedish men have been subjected to a sexual assault at some point during their childhood (cf. Forsberg 2005). These figures become much higher when potentially less serious forms of sexual abuse, such as indecent exposure, are included (e.g. Priebe and Svedin 2009, Svedin and Priebe 2009).

An increasing number of sex offences against children are reported to the police

It is widely accepted that the dark figure for sexual offences against children is very large (e.g. Macalinden 2006, Priebe and Svedin 2008). Since the 1980s, however, as the level of attention focused on children's exposure to sex crime has increased, the number of sex offences against children reported to the Swedish police has also increased substantially, and continues to rise.

In the context of the generally increasing trend in the number of reported sex offences against children, Swedish crime statistics show marked differences in the trends for different categories of sex crime. Since the mid-1990s, for example, and particularly subsequent to 2004, there has been a very marked increase in the number of child sex offences that have been registered by the police as suspected completed rapes. At the same time, the number of reported offences registered under the crime codes for sexual exploitation/sexual assault and attempted rape have followed somewhat different trends (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Numbers of police-registered sexual offences against children under the age of fifteen.¹ Sweden, 1995–2008.



It is likely that the variation in the statistical trends followed by different types of registered sex offences is due to a combination of different factors. One central factor, however, is that the Swedish sex crime legislation has undergone substantial changes since the mid-1990s, not least with regard to the way the rape offence is defined in the Swedish penal code.

Against this background, this study has two principal objectives:

- To illuminate possible changes in the type of reported offences that the police have registered as rapes against persons under the age of eighteen between the mid-1990s and the latter part of the 2000s.
- To present a more detailed description of the incidents registered by the police as rapes against persons under the age of eighteen towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century – here the focus is directed primarily at age-based variations in the type of situations in which the offences have been committed, and in the nature of the relationships between perpetrators and victims.

Changes in the Swedish rape legislation since the mid-1990s

For a sexual offence to be legally defined as rape in the mid-1990s, two specific criteria had to be met. The first of these was that the perpetrator had subjected the victim to “sexual intercourse” or “equivalent sexual relations”. In practice this criterion would have been met if the sexual offence had involved vaginal, anal or oral intercourse. There was no penetration requirement, however, and it was sufficient for the genitals to have come into contact.

Secondly, the sexual act had to have been committed under coercion, either in the form of threats or violence or through the perpetrator having *precipitated* a state of powerlessness in the victim *against the victim’s will*, e.g. via the administration of alcohol or drugs. It was not sufficient, for example, for the perpetrator to have exploited the fact that the victim had become too intoxicated to consent to sexual activity.²

In the mid-1990s, the rape provision applied equally irrespective of the age of the victim. Thus the requirements for a rape conviction in terms of the type of

¹ Reported sexual offences against persons under the age of fifteen (the age of sexual consent in Sweden) have long been presented separately in Swedish official crime statistics. Sex offences against children aged 15–17 were not recorded separately until 2008, however, which means that it is not possible to present long-term trends in the number of reported sex offences against children in this age group.

² In fact, the Swedish rape provisions make no reference to the notion of “consent”.

sexual acts involved and the use of threats or force were the same irrespective of whether the victim was a child or an adult.³

Since the mid-1990s, the rape provision in the Swedish Penal Code has been reformed twice, first in 1998 and then again in 2005. For the purposes of this study, three changes in the rape provisions have been identified as being of particular interest, each of which may be expected to have affected the nature of the offences recorded by the police as suspected rapes. These three central changes are briefly described below, together with the effects they would be expected to have on the type of incidents registered by the police as rape.

Extension of the types of sexual act that may entail criminal liability for rape

In the 1998 reform, certain types of penetrative sexual assaults with fingers or other objects were included under the rape statute for the first time, given that the other criteria for the rape offence were also met. Prior to the change introduced to the legislation in 1998, these acts would instead generally have been regarded as constituting the offence of *sexual coercion*.

Given this change, there is an expectation that the proportion of the offences registered by the police as suspected rapes that have involved some form of penetrative sexual assault involving fingers or objects should have increased since the mid-1990s relative to the proportion of offences involving vaginal, anal or oral intercourse.

Changes in the nature of the violence required to produce criminal liability for rape

In 2005, the Swedish sex crime legislation was changed in a number of important respects with regard to the nature of the threats or violence required for a sexual offence to be defined as rape.

Perhaps the most significant of these changes involved the introduction of a new offence in the penal code, specified as *rape of a child*. The provision relates to all cases where the victim is under the age of 15 (the age of sexual consent), irrespective of the nature of the relationship between victim and perpetrator, and to cases involving victims aged 15–17 if the perpetrator is the victim's parent or guardian (or similar)⁴.

The sexual acts covered by this new offence are the same as those covered by the rape statute as specified since 1998, i.e. vaginal, anal or oral intercourse or penetrative acts involving objects or similar. One important difference by comparison with the earlier formulation of the rape statute is that there is no requirement for any form of threat or violence to have been exerted in relation to the child for the act to be defined as rape. In principal, the new statute defines as rape any form of sexual intercourse, or any of the other sexual acts viewed as being equivalent to sexual intercourse, involving a child under the age of fifteen⁵, irrespective of the actions of the perpetrator in other respects. In the parliamentary bill outlining the new legislation, the government was very clear in noting that the provision should not leave room for any discussion of the significance of the child possibly having consented to sexual activity.

In cases of sexual offences against children aged 15–17, where the perpetrator is *not* a parent, guardian or similar, the legislative changes of 2005 have meant a reduction in the seriousness of the threats or violence required to produce criminal liability for the rape offence. The changes in this regard mean that less serious forms of violence, such as pushing a person or grabbing his or her arm, are now sufficient

³ From 1992, however, the rape provision required the court to give special consideration to the "low age" of the victim in assessing whether the crime should be regarded as constituting an aggravated offence.

⁴ Certain other groups of perpetrator are also covered by the statute, besides parents and legal guardians. These may for example include a boyfriend or girlfriend of one of the child's parents even though the individual in question has no legal standing as the child's guardian.

⁵ Or a child aged 15–17 in those cases where the perpetrator is a parent, guardian or similar.

to fulfil the coercion requirement in the reformulated rape provision. Similarly, the types of threats required to produce criminal liability for the rape offence have also been changed, from a requirement that the threat represent an imminent danger to the individual's life or health, to a requirement that the perpetrator has threatened to commit any form of criminal act.

These legislative changes mean that when comparing the acts registered by the police as suspected rapes in the mid-1990s and the late 2000s respectively, we would expect to find two specific differences in the nature of the incidents registered. Firstly, we would expect to find an increase in the proportion of offences registered by the police as suspected rapes against children under the age of fifteen where there is no indication that the perpetrator has used either physical force or coercion in order to carry out the offence. Among the offences registered as suspected rapes against 15–17-year-olds, we would expect to find an increase in the proportion of cases describing the use of less serious violence.

From a “powerless” condition precipitated by the perpetrator to the exploitation of a “helpless state”

As was noted above, a conviction for rape was possible in the mid-1990s even in the absence of the use of coercion, if the perpetrator had first precipitated a state of powerlessness in the victim, e.g. by means of drugs or alcohol, against the victim's will. The legislative changes introduced in 2005 also included a reformulation which means that what is now required, in the absence of threats or violence, is instead that the perpetrator has “improperly exploited” the fact that the victim was in a “helpless state”, irrespective of how this condition may have arisen. Examples of such a state noted in the penal code include illness, physical injury and psychological disorders, sleep, alcohol intoxication or being under the influence of drugs. As it relates to children, this change is first and foremost of significance for those aged 15–17 years, since for children under the age of fifteen, there is no longer any requirement that the perpetrator has used threats or violence or has exploited a powerless or helpless condition in order to commit the offence.

Among registered rapes involving 15–17-year-old victims, then, this change to the legislation means that, by comparison with the situation in the mid-1990s, we would expect to find that a larger proportion of the cases registered by the police as suspected rapes subsequent to 2005 have involved a victim who at the time of the offence was in what the legislation refers to as a helpless state.

A comparison of the cases registered as suspected rapes against children in 1995 and 2008

In order to illustrate the potential effects of the above described legislative changes on the statistical trend in reported sex offences in Sweden, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) has conducted a comparison of the reported offences registered by the police as suspected rapes against persons under the age of 18 in 1995 and 2008. The focus of the analysis has been directed at the question of whether the legislative changes introduced in 1998 and 2005 have produced the expected effects on the structure of registered rape crime in the ways described above.

The data are based on a sample that includes all registered suspected rapes against persons under the age of 18 from 1995, and a systematic sample of 25 percent of the registered suspected rapes against females under the age of 18 in 2008, and 50 percent of the registered suspected rapes against males under 18 from the same year. A total of 242 offence reports from 1995 and 456 from 2008 are included in the final study material.⁶ The data comprise on the one hand the offence description included in the offence reports registered by the police, and on the other

⁶ The results relating to 2008 have been adjusted to take into account the oversampling of offences against males relative to offences against females.

the first police interview conducted with the victim of the offence subsequent to the offence having been reported. The material have been collected and coded in the same way for both years. There are inevitably problems with regard to variations in the nature of the information included in the data set, since the material relating to some of the cases includes less information than the material relating to others. For the purposes of the findings presented below, however, the analysis proceeds on the basis of an assumption that the material may nonetheless be regarded as giving a comparable picture of *the information that the police had available to them* at the time they made the decision to record the reported offence specifically as a suspected completed rape, rather than as some other kind of sexual offence (e.g. sexual molestation or sexual assault).

The results of the analysis show that the nature of the incidents recorded by the police as suspected rapes has changed in a number of important respects over the course of the period examined. Further, the changes noted correspond to the expectations described above on the basis of the legislative changes introduced in 1998 and 2005 in each of the three areas examined by the analysis.

Increase in the proportion of cases where 15–17-year-olds have been in a “helpless condition” at the time of the offence

Among the cases involving 15–17-year-old victims, the analysis shows that there has been a substantial increase between 1995 and 2008 in the proportion of incidents registered by the police as suspected rapes where the victim may reasonably be assumed to have been in what the legislation has defined as a helpless condition at the time of the offence. The proportion of cases involving victims aged 15–17 who according to their own statements were either very drunk or asleep at the time of the offence increased from 18 percent in the material from 1995 to 30 percent in the material from 2008. The change is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

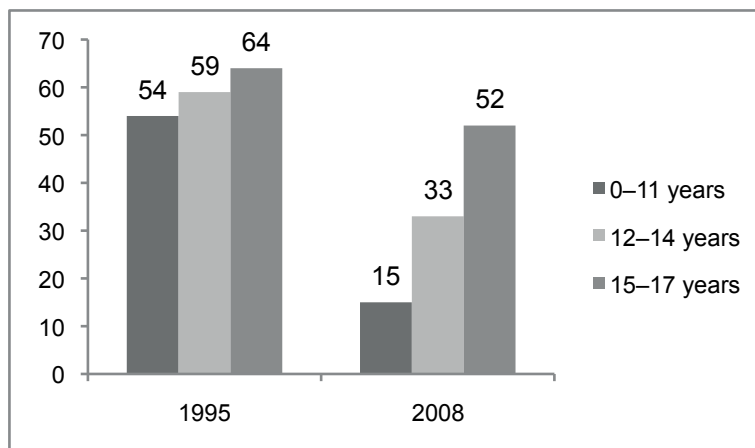
Decline in proportion of cases involving threats and violence

The proportion of cases which include a description of the perpetrator having used threats or violence in connection with the commission of the offence declined markedly between 1995 and 2008. The decline is most marked among the cases involving victims under the age of 15.

Among the reported offences involving the youngest victims (aged 0–11 years) there was a description of some kind of threat or violence having been used in 54 percent of the cases from 1995, as compared with only 15 percent of the cases from 2008. The corresponding figures for the offences involving victims aged 12–14 years were 59 percent in 1995 and 33 percent in 2008. The decline is not as substantial among the offences involving 15–17-year-olds, but there is nonetheless a statistically significant change⁷, from 64 percent of the cases in 1995, to 52 percent of the sample from 2008 (Figure 2).

⁷ $p < 0.05$

Figure 2. Proportion of cases that describe the victim having been exposed to threats or violence in connection with the reported offence. By victim age and year. 1995 and 2008. Percent.



Among the cases where there was a description of the use of violence in connection with the offence, there was a significant decline⁸ between 1995 and 2008 in the proportion of cases where there was also a description of the victim having suffered some kind of physical injury⁹ as a result of the offence. Among the cases involving 15–17-year-olds this proportion decreased from 29 percent of the cases that had involved some kind of violence in 1995 to 19 percent of the corresponding cases in the sample from 2008. Among the cases involving violence against victims aged 0–14 years, the proportion in which the victims had also suffered some form of physical injury had declined from 27 percent in 1995 to 11 percent in 2008.

Increase in the proportion of cases involving sexual assaults with objects or similar among 12–17-year-olds

Among the cases involving victims aged between 12 and 17 years, there is an increase between 1995 and 2008 in the proportion of cases registered by the police as suspected rapes where the assault has not included any form of vaginal, anal or oral intercourse, and where the most serious sexual act described involved a penetrative act involving either fingers or some other object.¹⁰ Cases of this kind account for only a relatively small proportion of the reported offences, but the increase is not insignificant – from 4 percent of the cases registered involving 12–14-year-old victims in 1995 to 10 percent of the sample involving the same age group in 2008, and from 1 percent to 4 percent among the cases involving 15–17-year-olds. Among the cases involving the youngest group of victims (aged 0–11), a relatively large proportion of the incidents were already of this kind in 1995 (11 percent). Within this age-group, however, no significant change was noted in the size of this proportion between 1995 and 2008.

⁸ p<0.05

⁹ The variable “physical injuries” includes cases where there was no report of a *visible* physical injury but where the material showed that the victim had experienced some form of pain or soreness as a result of the reported offence. In those cases where the victim had suffered visible physical injuries, these were most commonly minor injuries, usually in the form of redness or bruising. In a small number of the cases from both 1995 and 2008, however, it was clear that the victims had suffered serious physical injuries in connection with the offence. All of these most serious cases involved assaults against 15–17-year-olds.

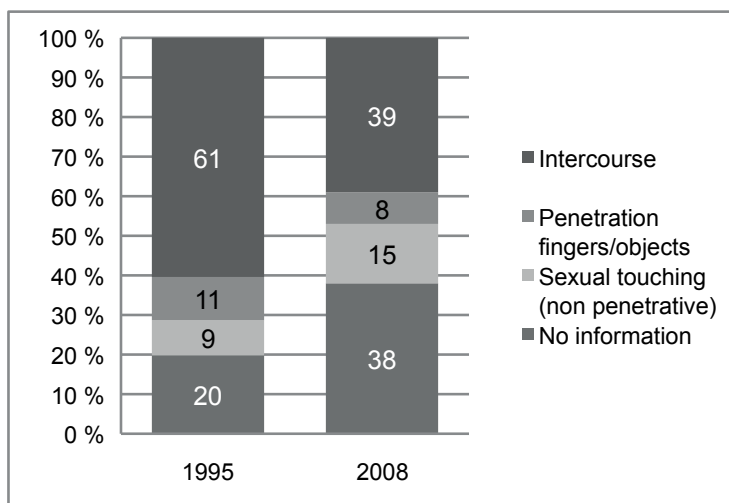
¹⁰ For the purposes of this analysis, each case was categorised on the basis of the “most serious” sexual act described as having been committed. The ranking of “seriousness” is as follows: 1) oral/anal/vaginal penetration, 2) penetration with fingers or objects, 3) non-penetrative sexual touching (e.g. of the breasts, buttocks or some other part of the body).

Signs of a change in police recording routines among the youngest children

Among the cases involving the youngest victims (aged 0–11 years), the comparison of the sexual acts described in the cases registered by the police as suspected rapes in 1995 and 2008 respectively produced a finding that could not be expected against the background of the legislative changes. Among this group of victims, there was a substantial increase between 1995 and 2008 in the proportion of cases which either included no description of a specific sexual act at all, or where the sexual act described stopped at some form of non-penetrative sexual touching. The proportion of cases of this kind had increased significantly¹¹ from less than 30 percent of the cases involving victims aged 0–11 in 1995 to over 50 percent of the corresponding cases in the sample from 2008 (Figure 3). No change of this kind was noted among the cases involving victims aged 12–17 years.

Since this change in the nature of the reported sexual offences against 0–11-year-olds that are registered by the police as rapes cannot be understood on the basis of the legislation, it seems likely that it instead reflects a change in police recording practices in relation to the types of cases that are registered as suspected rapes against young children. A reasonable interpretation on the basis of the available data is that the police, in cases where there was insufficient information available to assess what specific type of sexual offence had been committed, more often registered reported offences against young children as suspected rapes in 2008 than they had in the mid-1990s.¹²

Figure 3. Cases registered by the police as suspected completed rapes against 0–11-year olds. Proportion of cases in which the material shows the victim to have been subjected to various types of sexual acts. 1995 and 2008. Percent.



Summarising the above comparison of the incidents registered as suspected rapes in 1995 and 2008 respectively, the results indicate substantial changes between the two years. There are direct links between the majority of the changes noted and the expectations that were formulated on the basis of three central changes that have been made to the rape legislation in the course of the period examined. By comparison with the material from 1995, the nature of the sexual offences described in the offence reports from 2008 reflects the broadened universe of sexual acts and

¹¹ $p < 0.01$

¹² A similar trend has been noted in connection with the police recording of suspected lethal violence (Ryning 2008, Sarnecki 2009). Over time, an increasing number of deaths have been recorded by the Swedish police as suspected homicides, which have later shown themselves to be deaths resulting from other causes, such as suicides or accidents.

circumstances that the legislative changes were intended to bring under the rape statute.

It must be emphasised that it is not possible on the basis of the data collected for the purposes of this study to say either how much of the increase in the number of suspected rapes registered in the official statistics may be due to the legislative changes or to possible changes in police recording practices respectively, or how much may be due to other factors, such as an increase in reporting propensities or an increase in the actual prevalence of serious sexual offences against children.

A more detailed review of the offences registered by the police as suspected rapes against children in 2008

A highly skewed sex distribution

A more detailed review of the police reports filed in 2008 involving suspected rapes against persons under the age of 18 showed that the sex distributions in registered rape crimes against children are highly skewed with regard to both the perpetrators and the victims. Ninety-six percent of those described as perpetrators in cases involving victims aged 0–11 years are males, while males account for 99 percent of the perpetrators of registered suspected rape offences against children aged 12–14 and 15–17 respectively.

Among the victims, the proportion of girls increases from 77 percent of those aged 0–11 years, to 96 percent of those aged 12–14 and 98 percent of those aged 15–17. When these findings are compared with results from victim surveys focused on the prevalence of exposure to sexual assaults among young people, the material collected by the National Council in the current study suggests that the sex distribution among the victims of serious sexual offences reported to the police is more skewed than that found in victim surveys (cf. Priebe and Svedin 2009). This would suggest that reporting propensities are lower in relation to young male victims of sexual offences than they are in relation to young female victims.

Substantial differences between the crimes committed against younger and older children

The review also showed that there are substantial differences between the offences described in the offence reports relating to younger children and those relating to older children. Two areas where the differences are particularly marked involve the age difference between the victim and the perpetrator and the nature of the relationship between the two.

In the material relating to victims aged 0–11 years, the suspect is a person from either the immediate or extended family in over 70 percent of the cases (Table 1). In just over one-quarter of the cases the perpetrator is a person from outside the family who is already known to the child, e.g. a person who lives in the same neighbourhood or a family acquaintance. The perpetrator was someone previously unknown to the child in only three percent of the reported offences against children in this age group. In almost 90 percent of the offences registered as suspected rapes against children aged 0–11 years, the perpetrator is much older than the victim (Table 2).

Among the cases involving children aged between 12 and 17 years, suspected perpetrators from the immediate or extended family are less common. Instead it is more common for the perpetrators to be friends or acquaintances of the victims – these groups account for approximately 40 percent of the suspected perpetrators described in the reports relating to offences against both 12–14- and 15–17-year-olds. Among the cases involving older victims, it is also much more common for the suspected perpetrators to be persons previously unknown to the victims (18 percent of the perpetrators of offences against 12–14-year-olds, 34 percent of the perpetrators of offences against 15–17-year-olds). The cases involving victims aged

12–17 also included a substantial number where the perpetrator was either the victim’s current or former boyfriend, or someone the victim had met online. Both of these perpetrator categories are completely absent from the sample of cases involving offences against children under the age of 12.

Compared with the cases involving crimes against 0–11-year-olds, it is much more common for the offences against the older victims to have been committed by individuals of a similar age. Among the 12–14-year-olds the suspected perpetrator was less than five years older than the victim in just over 40 percent of cases and this proportion increases to just over 60 percent in the cases involving offences against victims aged 15–17.

Table 1. Proportion of reported offences committed by suspected perpetrators with different types of relationship to the victim. By victim age. Percent.¹³

Victim age	Proportion of cases			
	0–11 n=87	12–14 n=128	15–17 n=163	Total n=378
Relationship type				
Immediate/extended family	71	16	3	21
Current/former boyfriend	0	12	16	11
Friend or acquaintance	26	39	40	37
Non-acquaintance	3	18	34	22
Online contact	0	15	8	9

Table 2. Proportion of reported offences committed by suspected perpetrators who were less than five years, or at least five years older than the victim. By victim age. Percent.

Victim age	Proportion of cases			
	0–11 n=94	12–14 n=134	15–17 n=159	Total n=387
Age difference between victim and suspected perpetrator				
Less than five years	11	42	62	44
At least five years	89	58	38	56

Majority of the offences committed in indoor environments

As regards the situations in which the sexual offences had taken place, a large proportion had been committed in an indoor environment and they had commonly been committed when the perpetrator and the victim were alone. This was the case irrespective of the age of the victims. As was the case in relation to the nature of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, however, there was a much greater variation regarding the types of situation in which the offences had been committed among the cases involving teenage victims. By comparison with the cases involving the younger children, a larger proportion of the offences against teenagers were committed outside, often when the victims were on their way home at night, but also in connection with time spent with friends, e.g. in a park or some other outdoor environment. Another recurrent situation found in the cases relating to teenage victims involved offences committed in connection with parties or other situations characterised by alcohol consumption. In these cases, the material shows

¹³ In Table 1 and Table 2, those cases where there was insufficient information to categorise the nature of the relationship between victim and perpetrator (Table 1) and the age difference between victim and perpetrator (Table 2) have been excluded. Fifteen percent of the cases had missing data on the relationship variable, and thirteen percent had missing data on the age-difference variable.

that the offences often involved the perpetrator having exploited the fact that the victim was either intoxicated or sleeping.

Substantial variation in the means exploited by perpetrators in order to commit the offences

As has been noted in connection with the analysis comparing the material from 2008 with that from 1995, the presence of threats or physical violence increases with the age of the victims, and in the material from 2008, descriptions of the use of threats or violence were only relatively common in those cases involving older children. In these cases, the violence described in the material is often of a relatively minor nature, and most commonly involved the use of force to restrict the victim's freedom of movement. Of the total of 446 cases reports that were included in the material from 2008, just under 20 included a description of more serious forms of violence in the form of hitting, kicking, a hand applying pressure to the victim's throat or the presence of some kind of weapon.

The material shows that the use of violence was more common in those cases where the perpetrator was either someone previously unknown to the victim or a current or former boyfriend.

When considering these findings on the relative infrequency of the use of physical violence over and above that involved in sexually assaulting or abusing the victim, it would be misleading to interpret them as suggesting that the use of physical force was of little or no significance in relation to the sexual offences described in the material. The fear of being exposed to serious violence often emerged in the victims' descriptions of the incidents as having been at least as important as the use of physical force itself. It is also important to note that the material from the police interviews with the victims indicates very clearly that the perpetrators had often used other means of pressuring or manipulating the victims.

The National Council's review of the reported sex offences shows that the other means exploited by the perpetrators in order to facilitate the commission of the assaults varied with the age of the victim, with the nature of the relationship between the victim and the offender and also with the type of situation in which the offences were committed. Among the cases involving younger children, the perpetrators had often exploited the differences in age and maturity between themselves and the victims in order to subject the children to sexual abuse. Amongst other things, this manifested itself in the perpetrators defining the abuse as a shared "secret" or referring to the sexual assaults as a "game". Since a large proportion of the reported offences against the youngest children had been committed within the family, the perpetrators were often also able to exploit the emotional ties and physical intimacy that existed between themselves and their victims.

The cases involving 12–14-year-old and 15–17-year-old victims also included examples of perpetrators who had exploited their adult roles in relation to the victims in order to commit the offences. These examples included employers, teachers, sports coaches or trainers and adult treatment staff. Among the cases involving perpetrators who were of a similar age to the victims, the material provides examples of how various forms of social pressure, such as threatening to spread rumours about the victim among friends, were used to get the victim to do as the perpetrator wanted. Other forms of pressure were also applied to victims, such as harassing and badgering the victim to give in to sexual demands by arguing that sexual activity was part of being a "normal" teenager.

Preventing sexual offences against children

Research shows that sexual offences against children result from complex interactions among a large array of different factors, and both risk and protective factors for sexual offending and for exposure to sexual abuse have been identified at the individual level among both perpetrators and victims and also at the situational and societal levels (e.g. Svedin 2000, Townsend and Dawes 2005). Prevention re-

searchers argue that it is important for societies to implement a range of preventive strategies to combat sexual offending against children and that these should together cover the following three levels of prevention work (cf. Kaufman et al. 2002, CDC 2004):

1. Primary or universal prevention focuses on initiatives directed at an entire population in order to prevent sexual abuse occurring in the first place.
2. Secondary or selective prevention is focused on initiatives directed at high-risk groups.
3. Tertiary or indicated prevention involves initiatives that only become relevant once sexual offences have already been committed.

Researchers also argue that it is essential that all areas of society are included in the work to prevent sexual offences against children (cf. Pfäfflin 2003, Finkelhor 2009).

At present there is no systematic overview available of the work currently being conducted in Sweden with the goal of preventing sex crimes against children. We cannot therefore say what exactly is currently being done in relation to the above mentioned levels of prevention, and there does not appear to be any clearly outlined strategy regarding which agencies are responsible for strategic decisions in relation to sexual abuse prevention or for ensuring that prevention work in this area is implemented in practice. Within the context of the National Council's work with the current study, it has not been possible to conduct a systematic review of this kind. The report does however contribute by providing a brief overview of a range of preventive approaches that have been described in the international research in this area.

Traditional focus on tertiary measures

Traditionally, measures focused on the prevention of sexual offending against children have first and foremost been focused at the tertiary level (Mercy 1999). These include measures intended to provide assistance and support to those victims of sexual abuse who come to the attention of public sector agencies, the sanctioning of convicted offenders and also treatment measures for sex offenders and measures intended to assist with the reintegration of offenders into the community subsequent to their sentences. Some countries have also introduced registration systems for convicted sex offenders.

The evidence-based practices in the sexual abuse field with the best research support are currently those focused on therapeutic interventions to alleviate the harm suffered by the *victims* of sexual abuse (Finkelhor 2009). Amongst other things, high-quality scientific studies have shown that cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) treatments focused on the victims of sexual abuse and their families can effectively reduce the symptoms of post-traumatic stress (ibid.).

As regards treatments for adult sex offenders, a recent Swedish review of medical and psychological treatment methods for the prevention of sex offences against children concluded that the evidence base remains insufficient to arrive at definitive conclusions regarding which treatments might reduce the risk for recidivism in child sex offences (SBU 2011). At the same time, there is some scientific evidence that multisystemic therapy (MST) may have a preventive effect in relation to recidivism among *youths* who commit sexual offences against children (ibid.).

The tertiary measures described in the international research literature also include programs with the objective of assisting sex offenders to return to the community following a conviction. One promising example of programs of this kind is entitled Circles of Support and Accountability. The program has been evaluated over the course of a four-year period in Canada with promising results in the form of a much lower recidivism rate within the program group by comparison with a matched control group (Wilson et al. 2005, Armstrong et al. 2008).

In countries that have introduced registration systems for sex offenders, certain studies have found evidence of positive effects of such initiatives, whereas others

have instead noted an increased risk for recidivism among certain groups of registered sex offenders (Finkelhor 2009). Researchers have argued that this increased risk for reoffending may be linked to the fact that registration makes it more difficult for convicted sex offenders to find housing, work etc., which in turn increases the risk for new offences (ibid.).

Primary prevention

One of the central problems associated with the traditional focus on tertiary prevention measures is that only a small fraction of sex offences are brought to the attention of the justice system. Researchers have therefore argued that it is essential to increase efforts to combat sexual abuse in the fields of both primary and secondary prevention (e.g. Mercy 1999).

In the context of sexual offences against children, primary or universal prevention primarily involves informational or educational programs directed at children, parents and practitioners working with children and youths, as well as at the public more generally (Völker 2002, May-Chahal and Herczog 2003).

Educational programs focused on practitioners working in schools and day-care, the healthcare sector and children's associations may amongst other things serve to increase the participants' ability to identify signs of possible exposure to abuse among children. It is also important that practitioners are provided with guidelines on how to deal appropriately with the disclosure of sexually abusive experiences. Another central goal involves encouraging working methods that reduce the risk for exposure to abuse in the occupational environment of various groups of practitioners – e.g. in day-care or at school, in hospitals and care homes and in clubs and associations (e.g. Kaufman et al. 2002, Saul and Audage 2007, Horno Goicoechea 2010).

Schools are regarded as constituting a central arena for the provision of primary prevention initiatives to children (e.g. Wurtele 2009). This is not least due to the fact that schools are able to reach large numbers of children in a highly cost-effective way, and are furthermore able to do so in an environment that has been designed to maximize the opportunities for the transmission of knowledge to young people. School-based programs provide good opportunities to disseminate existing knowledge about risk situations, the methods used by perpetrators to create opportunities for abuse and also a range of protective behaviours, to potential victims of child sex offences (ibid.). Among older children, school-based programs also provide important opportunities to mobilise potential bystanders to sexual offences (e.g. Banyard et al. 2005, Finkelhor 2009).

School-based sexual abuse prevention programs have been the object of certain criticisms, amongst other things because they appear to place the responsibility for preventing sexual abuse on the shoulders of the children themselves. At the same time, however, it has been argued that although it is of course the adult community that bears the responsibility for protecting children against sexual offences, part of this responsibility nonetheless involves ensuring that children are given the knowledge and skills needed to empower them as far as possible to protect themselves. Not providing children with this knowledge should instead be viewed as ethically indefensible (Finkelhor 2009).

Evaluations of school prevention programs have provided evidence of a number of positive effects. Amongst other things participants have learned to recognise abusive situations and have acquired knowledge about ways of protecting themselves. Research has also found that programs have not led to negative effects in the form of e.g. increased anxiety among the participants or reduced levels of trust in adults. Instead studies have found a number of positive side-effects, such as an improved communication between children and parents. Studies have also noted that participating children have developed a more positive attitude towards their own bodies (Wurtele 2009, Finkelhor 2009).

At the present time, there is insufficient research of a sufficiently high scientific standard to be able to conclude that school programs have actually succeeded in

reducing the risk for exposure to sexual abuse. At the same time, however, international research reviews suggest that the studies that have been conducted in this area have also produced promising results (Kaufmann et al. 2002, Finkelhor 2009).

Outside the school environment, attempts have been made in several countries to reach a much broader audience with information and knowledge on the sexual abuse of children, e.g. by means of media campaigns. Such campaigns have a number of objectives, including those of increasing the strength of factors that may serve to restrain potential abusers, improving the ability of members of the public to recognise signs of possible abuse, and changing attitudes that may stop people from reporting suspicions of sexual offences against children (Kaufmann et al. 2002, Lee et al. 2007). Evaluations of measures of this kind have been able to show an improvement in the public's knowledge about child sex offences, although to date no scientific studies exist that might show whether informational campaigns of this kind actually reduce the prevalence of child sexual abuse (Kaufmann et al. 2002, Finkelhor 2009).

Secondary prevention

The goal of secondary prevention is to prevent sexual offences against children by directing measures specifically at individuals and groups deemed to be at high risk of becoming either perpetrators or victims.

As regards the possibilities for secondary prevention focused on individuals at risk of committing sexual offences against children, both Germany and the UK have established helplines which individuals who recognise themselves to be sexually interested in children can call anonymously for counselling and information on appropriate treatment. Researchers have noted that large numbers of individuals at risk of committing sexual offences against children can be motivated to participate in treatment (SBU 2011). In Sweden, however, the availability of preventive measures for individuals at risk of committing sexual offences against children appears to be limited to those living in the vicinity of Stockholm (Socialstyrelsen 2010). Another important problem is that there is at present a lack of research focused on the effectiveness or otherwise of preventive treatment methods for adults who have as yet not committed sexual offences against children, but who may be at risk of doing so in the future (SBU 2011).

A heightened risk for *exposure* to sexual abuse has been noted among children in families where a parent has mental health or substance abuse problems. The presence of these factors may affect both the ability of parents to monitor and provide their children with protection, but may also lead to shortfalls in meeting the child's emotional needs, which may in turn make the child more vulnerable to approaches from potential abusers (e.g. Finkelhor 2009). As a means of mitigating the risks faced by this group of children, researchers have proposed the use of family-focused measures that include the provision of support, information and parental skills-training. At the same time, it is important that such measures are provided in a non-stigmatising way, and that their focus is not limited to the risk for *sexual* abuse. The goal should rather be that of introducing an awareness of the risk for sexual abuse in parental support programs intended to combat the risk for all forms of neglect and physical and emotional mistreatment and abuse within the family (cf. Daro and Donnelly 2002).

Children with learning difficulties or other disabilities have been highlighted in the research as being at particularly high risk for exposure to sexual abuse (e.g. Brown 2010). In order to improve the protection of children in these groups, it is important that practitioners working in these fields in particular are given training focused on amongst other things how to recognise signs of possible exposure to abuse. The training should also provide knowledge on the types of situations that involve a risk for sexual abuse and on how this risk can be reduced by means of adapting workplaces and working methods. Against the background of research indicating that the dark figure for sexual offences is particularly high among children with disabilities, it is also important that practitioners are given training and

guidelines to ensure that these children are given the opportunity to disclose possible experiences of abuse (ibid).

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