

Summary of  
Homicide in the criminal milieu  
2005–2017

Brå Report 2020:4

# Summary

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the number of homicides<sup>1</sup> in Sweden has steadily declined, at least until a few years ago, when the decline came to an end and the curve started to turn upwards. However, the level of homicides today is still lower than that witnessed during the 1990s. An earlier study by Brå showed that different types of homicide have followed different trends over time, and that the main cause of the increase seen in recent years is found in homicides arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu<sup>2</sup>. The same study also showed that this type of homicide has been increasing since 2013, and at a faster rate in more recent years, which has also had an impact on the total number of homicides in Sweden (Brå 2019b).

The present study was conducted in order to take a more detailed look at homicides arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu. The study encompasses all registered cases of homicide from the period 2005–2017 that have been categorised as homicides arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu. This involves a total of 216 cases, of which 84 cases come from the first eight years of the study period (2005–2012) and 132 cases from the remaining five years of the period examined (2013–2017). This corresponds to an average of 11 cases per year during the earlier period and 26 cases per year during the later period. The highest annual number of cases during the entire study period was 34 cases in 2017.

## Primarily in metropolitan areas

The results of the study show that homicides arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu are primarily a phenomenon found in metropolitan areas. Just over one-third of the cases occurred in Stockholm County (35 percent), just over one-quarter in Västra Götaland (26 percent), home to Gothenburg, and almost one-quarter in Skåne (23 percent), home to Malmö, with the remaining sixth occurring in other parts of the country (16 percent). However, when considered in relation to population size, the annual rate per 100,000 of population is largest in Skåne (0.31), followed by Stockholm (0.28), Västra Götaland (0.27) and the rest of the country (0.06). An analysis over time shows increases both in the three metropolitan counties and in the rest of the country. However, the largest increases have occurred in Stockholm and Västra Götaland.

The study also shows that in relation to population size and in comparison, with the rest of the country, homicides arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu occur more than eight times as often in areas classified by the Swedish Police Authority as socially vulnerable areas.

## These homicides often committed outdoors with firearms

As regards the crime scenes associated with homicides arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu, the study shows that these have largely moved outdoors, into various public spaces. Firearms are commonly used, and have furthermore become increasingly common over the course of the study period. Automatic firearms, which were extremely rare at the beginning of the study period, were used in almost one-quarter of the cases towards the end of the period. The increase in the use of firearms has been greatest outside the three metropolitan counties, and the proportion of cases in which firearms are used in the rest of the country is now approaching that found in the metropolitan counties.

As the homicides arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu have increasingly moved to outdoor environments, it has also become more common for police investigations to only feature eyewitnesses who do not know the victims or the perpetrators, or for no bystanders to have witnessed the incidents. The percentage of cases taking place in the evening or at night is larger towards the end of the period, which may reasonably be expected to reduce the likelihood of bystanders witnessing the incidents. Other research also shows that in certain areas people may be afraid to come forward as eyewitnesses in cases where they have information of relevance to criminal investigations.

## Almost exclusively men's violence against other men

In general, most victims of homicide are men. During the 1990s and 2000s, about two-thirds of the total number of homicide victims in Sweden were male. However, as conflicts in the criminal milieu have

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<sup>1</sup> Murder, manslaughter, infanticide and assault resulting in death.

<sup>2</sup> The term criminal milieu refers to a profiteering milieu in which individuals systematically commit offences in order to earn money, often in the form of drug trafficking or organised criminal activities.

become increasingly common, this proportion has increased, and in more recent years men now account for three-quarters of all victims of homicide. Men account for more than nine out of ten perpetrators of homicide (94 percent).

In the case of homicides arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu, the differences between the sexes are even greater, and these homicides almost exclusively involve men committing acts of violence against other men (97 percent of victims and all perpetrators). In the few cases in which women are victims of this type of homicide, they are not the primary targets of the violence. Rather, they are killed together with, or instead of, a boyfriend/partner or some other close relative.

### Those involved are younger than previously

Victims of homicides arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu are generally younger than victims of other types of homicide. One-quarter of the victims included in the present study were 23 years of age or younger at the time of the crime, and the median age at the time of the crime is 28 years. In addition to victims, the study also includes suspects and, in cases that have been cleared by the police, confirmed perpetrators. The suspects are considerably younger than the victims (median age 23.5 years), whereas the perpetrators are only marginally younger (median age 27 years). A comparison over time also shows that the groups of victims, suspects and perpetrators have all become younger during the study period. In the case of victims, the median age has declined from 32.5 years to 25 years between the earlier period (2005–2012) and the later period (2014–2017). The corresponding figures for suspects involve a decline from 27 years to 23 years, and for perpetrators a decline from 28 years to 25 years. As regards the residential status of the victims and perpetrators, this too has changed, reflecting the decline in the age of those involved in this type of homicide. Towards the end of the period it is more common for victims and perpetrators to still be living with their parents and it is less common for them to be living alone or together with a partner. It is also more common towards the end of the period for victims and perpetrators to be unemployed or studying, and less common for them to be in employment or receiving sickness benefit or a sickness or invalidity pension.

### More common to have previously been suspected of homicide, interference in a judicial matter and extortion

Most of those involved, victims as well as suspects and perpetrators, have previously been suspected of various offences. Common offence types include violent crime, theft and drug crime. It is also relatively common to have been suspected of possessing an offensive weapon, primarily knives or firearms. This applies throughout the study period. Notwithstanding the above, for three types of crime the proportion of those involved in this type of homicide who have previously been registered as suspects has increased dramatically. These are homicide, the offence of interference in a judicial matter (e.g. threatening an injured party or witness) and extortion. For example, the proportion of victims previously suspected of homicide has more than doubled between the earlier period and the later period examined in the study (from 16 percent to 34 percent), the proportion previously suspected of interference in a judicial matter has increased from 17 percent to 30 percent, and the proportion previously suspected of extortion has increased from 16 percent to 31 percent.

Another distinct change is that alcohol seems to be playing a successively smaller role in relation to homicides in the criminal milieu. Among both victims and perpetrators, the proportion who had consumed alcohol at the time of the offence was lower during the later of the two periods examined (11 percent and 8 percent, respectively) than during the earlier period (23 percent and 21 percent, respectively). By contrast, the proportion of victims who had taken drugs at the time of the offence was greater during the later period (40 percent) than during the earlier period (22 percent).

### Those involved appear in several investigations

Looking to the underlying motives and causes of homicide arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu, at the end of the period examined it is more common on the basis of the material examined from police investigations and court documentation to be unable to identify the underlying cause of the violence or the triggering event. In the few cases where this is possible, homicides appear often to be related to financial motives, revenge or the perpetrator feeling personally threatened. The fact that the underlying motives and causes are unknown to a greater extent at the end of the period is probably due in part to the increase in the proportion of cases in which no eyewitnesses or other informants appear to have come forward. In those cases where there are eyewitnesses, these are more often individuals who are

acquainted with neither the victims nor the perpetrators. In those cases where there are witnesses who know the victims and/or the perpetrators, these are often able to provide information about motives and causes.

A special network analysis conducted as part of the study shows that it is more common for cases at the end of the period to be linked to each other in the sense that the suspects in one investigation also appear as suspects or victims in other investigations. The network analysis identified 30 different clusters of investigations which are linked together by means of at least one suspect in one investigation appearing as a suspect or victim in a later investigation.

In general, the clearance rate for homicides arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu is lower than for other types of homicide. This is due to this particular type of homicide being more difficult to investigate, since there is seldom an identified perpetrator during the initial stages of the investigation, which is more often the case in other types of homicide. Other research has also shown that the clearance rate is lower for homicides that take place in outdoor environments and which involve the use of firearms, which is something that is common in conflicts in the criminal milieu. The present study also shows that the clearance rate for homicides arising from conflicts in the criminal milieu has declined dramatically during the period examined. One partial explanation for this is that there appears to have been an increase over the course of the period in the number of homicides whose characteristics make them more difficult to investigate and for which the clearance rate is therefore likely to be lower.

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