



RIKSREVISIONEN
The Swedish National Audit Office

RiR 2010:10 Summary

Handling of everyday crimes:
A key task for police and prosecutors

Summary

Riksrevisionen (the Swedish National Audit Office, SNAO) has examined how the police and prosecutors handle 'everyday crimes', i.e. less complex or serious cases where the preliminary investigation is led by the police rather than by prosecutors.

The number of reported cases involving such crimes is almost 1.1 million each year, meaning that they account for 88 per cent of all cases reported to the police. Everyday crimes are frequent and affect many people. Common types include theft, damage to property and non-aggravated assault. Road-traffic offences, drink-driving and minor drugs crimes are also counted among everyday crimes. In other words, handling everyday crimes is a key task of the police and prosecutors. The SNAO estimates that the police spend about SEK 3.3 billion a year to handle everyday crimes. This represents one-third of their total costs of investigation and legal action.

Everyday crimes make up a heterogeneous group of cases with varying likelihoods of successful investigation and clearance. What they have in common is that the imposed sanctions are relatively mild and that many of them do not require particularly extensive investigative work. It is often possible to investigate them quickly, soon after they have been committed. This makes it possible to claim that conditions are good for creating procedures and developing working methods that will contribute to efficient handling and thus to better results.

Even so, many everyday-crime cases take a long time to handle. For example, the police need 117 days on average to complete an assault case. One consequence is that crime victims may feel that what they have undergone is not taken seriously. Both victims and suspects have to wait, and those who have committed crimes can continue to do so since society's reaction to their behaviour is absent or delayed. In other words, there is a risk that citizens may lose confidence in the ability of the legal system to discharge the duties it has been given by the Riksdag (parliament) and the Government.

Scope of the audit

The audit of the police and prosecutors focused on the internal efficiency of the agencies, i.e. on issues of control, processes and procedures for their handling of everyday crimes. Four main problem areas were identified as regards internal efficiency. They relate to administration and case logistics; to the management of preliminary investigations; to the investigative staff; and to quality assurance of investigations of everyday crimes.

The audit provides answers to the following audit questions:

1. Do local police authorities and local public prosecution offices handle everyday crimes in an efficient manner?
2. Do top management of the central agencies¹ exercise adequate control and monitoring to ensure efficient handling of everyday crimes?
3. Does the Government exercise adequate direction over the agencies to ensure efficient handling of everyday crimes?

Conclusions

The SNAO's overall conclusion is that the Government and the agencies have so far not done enough to solve the problems in the handling of everyday crimes. What is more, such measures as have been taken were often late considering for how long the related problems had been known. The main reason for the problems is that direction and control have not worked and thus have not had their full impact. The problems are to be found above all at the police.

The handling of everyday crimes could be developed

The SNAO concludes that the procedures and working methods are not sufficiently well-developed. This is true above all of the police, where early investigative measures are delayed and where cases that cannot or should not be investigated are not closed immediately. There is also variation in the use of simplified procedures – of which there actually exist two different versions. The main reason is that the local police authorities have not yet succeeded in implementing the changes required under the National Investigative Concept of the Police (PNU). This cannot succeed unless both top management and staff help make sure that the changes are implemented in practice. In other words, such changes cannot have their full impact unless the entire organisation truly accepts the clear operational guidelines that the PNU represents.

As regards the Prosecution Authority, the main problem is that decisions whether to take prosecutorial action are prepared by prosecutors even when they could have been prepared by other staff. Many prosecutors today spend time on routine tasks that could be performed by others. However, there are examples of more efficient working methods where non-prosecutorial staff prepare cases and draw up proposals for decisions whether to take prosecutorial action. In two years, the Prosecution Authority has reduced the time it takes for a prosecutor to decide whether to take action from 36 to 27 days on average for every day crime-cases. However, the SNAO considers that there is additional scope to enhance efficiency in the handling of everyday crimes at the Prosecution Authority as well.

The SNAO also concludes that the Prosecution Authority and the local police authorities have not developed their cooperation with a view to securing the quality of investigations of everyday crimes so as to ensure that

¹ The National Police Board and the Office of the Prosecutor-General.

such investigations can constitute an adequate basis for decisions whether to prosecute. The audit shows that there is often no systematic quality assurance of the preliminary investigations of everyday crimes submitted by the police to prosecutors.

Control and monitoring by the National Police Board are not adequate to ensure efficient handling of everyday crimes

Since the Government instructed the main agencies concerned to take action on everyday crimes in May 2009, the National Police Board has been making more active efforts to develop the handling of such crimes. However, the SNAO finds that the Board has not ensured the full implementation of the PNU throughout the police organisation. Nor has the Board set reasonable long-term goals for the local police authorities, to ensure that they will all be able to achieve equally good results.

The Government does not exercise adequate direction over the agencies to ensure efficient handling of everyday crimes

The SNAO finds that the duties and powers of the agencies are clear and that the agencies have been given adequate resources. However, the Government has not succeeded in making the police and prosecutors fully apply a 'chain' perspective so as to place their own work in a wider context. The operational objectives decided separately by the police and the Prosecution Authority as regards investigation and prosecutorial action do not quite match. As a result, they do not create synergies when it comes to achieving the overall objective of the legal system, which is that prosecutorial action should be taken more often.

The SNAO also finds that the direction exercised by the Government over the police has not focused enough on the core task of handling everyday crimes. In practice, this has entailed that everyday-crime handling has been given a generally lower priority than more targeted efforts to deal with specifically prioritised crimes.

It has emerged in the audit that civilian investigators – although they are seen as an asset within the police – are not being recruited to any significant extent. The nationwide target of 20,000 police officers may undermine opportunities to recruit civilian investigators. The SNAO considers that this type of management in detail of the size and composition of the police force may have an impact on operational efficiency.

The SNAO also considers that it may be possible to change the conditions under which the police handle everyday crimes. The police today have a duty to handle cases that are not going to be investigated since they do not concern crimes, where the reason for filing a report is that insurance agencies will not pay compensation unless a matter has been reported to the police.

Recommendations

Against the background of its observations and conclusions relating to the handling of everyday crimes by the police and prosecutors, the SNAO makes the following recommendations:

The Government should:

- ensure that the work performed by the agencies in the context of their instructions to take action on everyday crimes has an actual impact on their operations; and impose stricter requirements on those agencies if their performance does not improve;
- consider whether the two simplified investigation procedures can be replaced by a single one;
- remove any obstacles to the efficient use of civilian investigators;
- set up an inquiry to determine whether it is possible to restrict handling within the police of reports that obviously do not concern crimes, such as lost objects and cases of an insurance rather than criminal nature.

The National Police Board and the local police authorities should:

- supplement their present objectives with long-term ones for the local police authorities from a 'legal chain' perspective, not least to give the worst performers opportunities to improve;
- ensure that the working methods of the National Investigative Concept of the Police (PNU) are put to full use throughout the police organisation;
- promote the use of civilian investigators when this may enhance efficiency in the handling of everyday crimes;
- develop cooperation with the Prosecution Authority to secure the quality of the preliminary investigations submitted and enhance the overall efficiency of the legal system.

The Prosecution Authority should:

- continue the developmental efforts already begun at local public prosecution offices as regards the handling of everyday crimes, letting non-prosecutorial staff prepare decisions whether to take prosecutorial action, and implement this throughout the Prosecution Authority;
- develop cooperation with the police to secure the quality of the preliminary investigations submitted and enhance the overall efficiency of the legal system.