

One percent of the population is responsible for 63 percent of violent crime convictions

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The majority of all violent crime in Sweden is committed by a small number of people. They are almost all male (92%) who early in life develops violent criminality, substance abuse problems, often diagnosed with personality disorders and commit large number non-violent crimes. These are the findings of researchers at Sahlgrenska Academy who have examined 2.5 million people in Swedish criminal and population registers.

In this study, the Gothenburg researchers matched all convictions for violent crime in Sweden between 1973 and 2004 with nation-wide population register for those born between 1958 to 1980 (2.5 million).

Of the 2.5 million individuals included in the study, 4 percent were convicted of at least one violent crime, 93,642 individuals in total. Of these convicted at least once, 26 percent were re-convicted three or more times, thus resulting in 1 percent of the population (23,342 individuals) accounting for 63 percent of all violent crime convictions during the study period.

"Our results show that 4 percent of those who have three or more violent crime convictions have psychotic disorders, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Psychotic disorders are twice as common among [repeat offenders](#) as in the general population, but despite this fact they constitute a very small proportion of the repeat offenders," says Örjan Falk, researcher at Sahlgrenska Academy.

One finding the Gothenburg researchers present is that "acts of insanity" that receive a great deal of mass media coverage, committed by someone with a severe psychiatric disorder, are not responsible for the majority of violent crimes.

According to the researchers, the study's results are important to crime prevention efforts.

"This helps us identify which individuals and groups in need of special attention and extra resources for intervention. A discussion on the efficacy of punishment (prison sentences) for this group is needed as well, and we would like to initiate a debate on what kind of criminological and medical action that could be meaningful to invest in," says Örjan Falk.

Studies like this one are often used as arguments for more stringent sentences and US principles like "three strikes and you're out". What are your views on this?

"Just locking those who commit three or more violent crimes away for life is of course a compelling idea from a societal protective point of view, but could result in some undesirable consequences such as an escalation of serious violence in connection with police intervention and stronger motives for perpetrators of repeat violence to threaten and attack witnesses to avoid life sentences. It is also a fact that a large number of violent crimes are committed inside the penal system".

"And from a moral standpoint it would mean that we give up on these, in many ways, broken individuals who most likely would be helped by intensive psychiatric treatments or other kind of interventions. There are also other plausible alternatives to prison for those who persistently relapse into violent crime, such as highly intensive monitoring, electronic monitoring and of course the continuing development of specially

targeted treatment programs. This would initially entail a higher cost to society, but over a longer period of time would reduce the total number of violent crimes and thereby reduce a large part of the suffering and costs that result from [violent crimes](#)," says Örjan Falk.

"I first and foremost advocate a greater focus on children and adolescents who exhibit signs of developing violent behavior and who are at the risk of later becoming repeat offenders of violent crime".

The article *The 1 % of the population accountable for 63 % of all violent crime convictions*, was published in *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* in October.

More information: link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00127-013-0783-y

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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