

See all News



“ COMMENT

Sweden has become a gangster's paradise – and a case study in how not to integrate migrants

Its liberal migration and criminal justice systems have incubated a shocking sub-culture of violence

FRASER NELSON



2 February 2023 • 9:00pm



When my wife first moved over from Stockholm, she took a while to adjust to the crime. Yellow police signs appealing for witnesses after a stabbing would terrify her. She'd tool up when venturing out of an evening, as if readying for battle. How times have changed. In London, a city with about the same population as Sweden, no one was shot dead in the six months leading up to spring last year. In the next six months, four were shot dead in Södertälje, a city half an hour's drive south-west of Stockholm.

Since then, things have become far worse. A gangland war erupted on Christmas Day and warring factions have been rampaging around the city in a manner resonant more of 1930s Chicago than contemporary Scandinavia. Gangsters use bombs to send each other warnings; assassins to shoot one another dead. There were 61 fatal firearms attacks last year, six times more than the combined total for Denmark, Finland and Norway. Children young enough to be immune from prosecution under Swedish law are, increasingly, sent to carry out the attacks.

For those of us who zoom in and out of Sweden's national debate, the most striking aspect is the language. Events that ought to scandalise an entire country are now being reported as part of everyday life. "For me, it has become normal," said an eyewitness quoted in a report after last weekend's murder of a 15-year-old in a shopping centre in Skogås, a suburb of Stockholm. "It's the third or fourth time it's happened and took place close to the shopping centre, so it wasn't that shocking."

Sweden gave the world Scandi-noir fiction. Now true crime is taking over – with podcasts, books and reports into a nationwide murder mystery that has the nation stumped. Why Sweden? Why so bad? Why children? Why is it getting worse? Yes, the 2015 asylum wave saw Sweden import all kinds of criminality among the record numbers of people it took in. But Germany took in even more and doesn't have such

problems. Sweden's police has seen its budget rise by 75 per cent in recent years but is still losing. Worse, they're not sure how to win.

Max Åkerwall, a Stockholm police chief, spoke about it earlier this week. Locking up a gang leader, he said, creates a vacuum which leads to a violent power struggle among rival factions (police have counted 52 gangs). Hence more bombs, guns and murders. So it's not a matter of a few Mr Bigs. It's the emergence of a whole subculture of violence, unwittingly incubated by Sweden's liberal immigration and criminal justice system.

“We now have parallel societies in Sweden,” said Magdalena Andersson before she lost power as prime minister last year. “We live in the same country, but in completely different realities.” The phrase “no-go” area is deeply controversial in Sweden but certainly applies to neighbourhoods where authorities – even ambulance workers – cannot go for fear of attack.

Sweden has long seen itself as a “humanitarian superpower” and its generosity with migrants once saw it take in my wife's parents, who fled the Soviets after the 1968 Prague Spring. My Stockholm-born spouse was taught a “home language” – Czech – even though Sweden was her home. This nods to the other problem: Sweden's generosity to accommodate asylum seekers is rivalled only by the problems it has always had with integrating them into society.

Perhaps the best measure of integration is the difference in unemployment rates between non-natives and locals. In Britain, it's negligible but Sweden has the worst gap in the developed world (15 vs 4 per cent). If you allow people smugglers to pour tens of thousands of usually male asylum seekers into a system unable to absorb them, you fill up edge-of-town estates where organised crime is the big business.

Police in Germany and Britain are more used to dealing with imported bad guys – jihadis and other assorted terrorists – and our laws are harsher. Sweden's courts have always been keener on the wellbeing of offenders, especially the young. A few years ago, a law was passed declaring that arrest, detention or imprisonment of anyone under 18 should only take place “as a last resort”. This delighted the gangsters, who quickly took it as a licence to use children as their foot soldiers.

Police say that children account for most of those arrested for gang-related violence, with about 1,200 of these so-called “child soldiers” now at large. In England, the age of criminal responsibility is 10. In Sweden, it's 15: no one under that age can be sentenced to any punishment. Half of those arrested in raids after Stockholm's post-Christmas murders are school-aged. Their trademark weapon is the thermos bomb: homemade and carried in flasks which, in a child's hand, don't look suspicious.

The emergence of “child soldiers” makes reading Sweden's newspapers all the more surreal. “More than 25 shots were fired at the apartment building,” ran a report in Aftonbladet last week. “Police are working on the theory that the perpetrators shot at the wrong door. Another 15-year-old has been detained.”

And this, from a few days earlier: “A 13-year-old and a 14-year-old were stopped at the last moment from committing a crime with automatic weapons in Hammarbyhöjden, in southern Stockholm.”

Sweden was late to allow police to bug mobile phones, late to subject 19-year-old murderers to life sentences. Lise Tamm, a former chief prosecutor, complained about the “naivety” of the system as a whole. Thousands of decent people, she said, are being left in the lurch “as we protect the integrity of criminals and ignore the victims”.