



Summary

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Online child sexual abuse – major challenges for police and prosecutors

Summary

The Internet has opened new arenas to perpetrators where they can seek contact to commit sexual abuse and exchange abuse material on a whole different scale. This has radically increased the risk of sexual offences against children.

The Swedish National Audit Office (Swedish NAO) has audited whether the police and prosecutors work efficiently to prevent and deal with online child sexual abuse. The audit shows that there are inefficiencies. In order to address the problems, the Police Authority should strengthen its governance and focus its support of operations against online child sexual abuse. The Swedish Prosecution Authority should increase the capacity of the local public prosecution offices to handle large-scale cases.

Audit findings

The country's seven police regions have chosen different solutions for their operations against online child sexual abuse. Among other things, the crimes are investigated at different levels and by different groups. This can increase the risk of unjustified differences in results and of some offences falling between the cracks in the organisation.

The crime of commercial sexual exploitation of children through the purchase of sexual acts often fails to be noticed. In order to detect and deal with this crime, active surveillance and outreach activities are required, which also need to be done in close cooperation with the municipalities' social services. The risk that this will

not occur is evident when groups dealing with online child sexual abuse have a large influx of child pornography and grooming offences. Commercial sexual exploitation of children through the purchase of sexual acts makes up a very small and decreasing proportion of reported online child sexual abuse offences, from 12 to 3 per cent in 2016–2020. The number of reported offences is expected to only be a fraction (2 per cent) of the actual number of offences.

There are also shortcomings in national governance, which may account for the variation that exists at regional level. The Police Authority has been slow in developing and implementing national guidelines, and set time frames have not been kept. The work started in 2016 and was due to be completed in 2019, but no sooner than January 2022 could all regions be expected to have organised their activities substantially in accordance with the national guidelines. Also, methodological support for parts of the online child sexual abuse area is still lacking, and the evaluation model of the Swedish Police Authority does not necessarily favour quality in the investigation process.

The operations against online child sexual abuse have experienced significant difficulties in obtaining the necessary support from IT and HR departments. On the IT side, it is mainly a matter of streamlining the work on child pornography crimes, where different programmes can facilitate the review and categorisation of abuse material. When it comes to training, the Swedish Police Authority has had difficulty in prioritising and meeting even the most basic requirements of the specialist groups working against online child sexual abuse. The Authority has begun to address these problems.

Prosecutors often lead preliminary investigations into online child sexual abuse offences, while the police conduct the actual investigative work. This requires good cooperation both at agency level and between individual officials. Cooperation between individual prosecutors and investigators generally works well, although there may be different opinions about how cases should be prioritised and investigated. Police officers and prosecutors agree that a clear success factor in investigating online child sexual abuse offences is that there are specially appointed and trained staff who can prioritise the same cases.

Online child sexual abuse offences require substantial coordination and cooperation between many different stakeholders. There is considerable potential to further develop and improve this cooperation. It seems viable to revisit the role and scope of the multi-disciplinary and interagency approach of the Barnahus (children's houses). In general, the police need to develop their interaction with the municipalities' social services.

The Swedish NAO's recommendations

Recommendations to the Swedish Police Authority

- Without delay, ensure that employees have access to the IT support and training necessary for the work against online child sexual abuse to be efficient and assure legal security. This includes a more efficient decision-making system for prioritising and meeting the needs of the operations in a coordinated way.
- Strengthen the ownership of the process for dealing with online child sexual abuse. For example, the process owner should quality assure the police regions' methods to a greater extent and develop follow-up and evaluation of the operations and their organisation.
- Give higher priority to the prevention of online child sexual abuse. This may involve developing collaboration with other relevant agencies and organisations. But it may also be a matter of involving local police and patrolling the internet.

Recommendations to the Swedish Prosecution Authority

- Streamline the investigation work in collaboration with the Police Authority, for example by developing national principles for common case priorities and for how extensively abuse material should be reviewed.
- Strengthen support for local public prosecution offices, for example by setting up a specialist for online child sexual abuse and support resources that can provide temporary support to local public prosecution offices for large-scale cases.

Recommendations to the Government

- Ensure that Barnahus activities are more consistent, of high quality and accessible to all vulnerable children and young people.