



# Police forensic activities

Interim report:

Evaluation of the effort to increase the number of police employees by 10,000

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) -  
centre for knowledge about crime and crime prevention measures

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## **Police forensic activities**

Interim report: Evaluation of the effort to increase the number of police employees by 10,000

English summary of Brå report 2023:1

# Summary

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå for short) has been commissioned by the Government to evaluate the initiative to increase the number of Swedish police employees by 10,000 (Ju2021/02238). The initiative began in 2018 and will continue until 2024. In the commission to Brå, forensic activities are mentioned as an area that is particularly important to map. The Police forensic specialists assist investigative operations in securing and examining digital and physical evidence. Results from forensic examinations are often crucial in criminal investigations and are used both as evidence in trials and as a basis for deciding on the direction of an investigation. Forensic activities are thus an important piece of the puzzle in increasing the police's ability to combat crime and are one of the activities that, according to the Police Authority's growth strategy, need to be strengthened by 2024.

The purpose of the study is to report on the extent to which forensic activities have benefited from the government's investment in 10,000 more police employees, whether the increase in resources has contributed to better results and what remaining obstacles there are to achieve an efficient forensic process. In order to answer the study's questions, Brå has analysed statistics for the period 2017 to 2021, both in terms of the production of forensic examinations and the development of human resources. Brå has also collected data in the form of a survey answered by more than 1,000 police employees and 300 prosecutors during the spring of 2022.

## The number of employees has increased - but not more than in other parts of the agency

Forensic activities in the Swedish Police can be divided into three branches: forensic fieldwork, laboratory forensics and digital forensics. The number of employees in forensic activities as a whole increased by 16 percent between 2017 and 2021. The increase is in line with the Police Authority as a whole, but is weaker than the average growth in investigative units. The growth in forensic activities is also lower than what the National Forensic Centre (NFC) itself saw the need for in its competence supply plan towards 2024.

## Largest increase in output in laboratory forensics

Of the three forensic branches, laboratory forensics, carried out at the NFC, has increased the most in terms of both staff and output. This is partly explained by an increase in inflow when the NFC was given more operational responsibility, and partly by the Vilgot operation which ran in 2021 and provided increased resources to handle more examinations. The most common types of laboratory examinations are DNA and drug analyses,

which together account for more than three quarters of output. Despite the overall increase in resources, about half of the investigation leaders<sup>1</sup> feel that the capacity of the laboratory forensics is insufficient to meet the need for forensic examinations.

More crime scene investigators while the number of lokus decreased Forensic fieldwork has been slightly reinforced. The number of crime scene investigators, working mainly on serious crime, increased substantially over the period. At the same time, the number of local crime scene investigators (lokus for short), who are mainly used for volume crime, decreased. This may be a reasonable development in view of the change in the flow of crime, where, for example, fewer and fewer residential burglaries are reported. At the same time, this trend is not reflected in any of the police authority's policy documents, which suggests that there has been an unintentional or unspoken downgrading of volume crime. Although forensic fieldwork has not increased to the same extent as the other branches, the majority of specialists within the field feel that they are able to meet the demand from investigative units. This may be due to the fact that the total number of cases they handle has decreased.

Several signs that digital forensics are undersized

The number of digital forensics technicians has increased at about the same rate as the Police Authority in total. In terms of absolute numbers, this means around ten more posts per year between 2017 and 2021. This is a substantially lower outcome than the NFC had estimated that there was a need for. Both investigation leaders and digital forensic specialists also believe that the capacity of digital forensic operations is insufficient to cope with the increased demand. Over the same period, as the number of digital forensic specialists has increased by 17 percent, the number of digital examinations conducted has increased by 38 percent. The most common type of examination for the whole studied period is mobile or computer media examinations. However, these types of examinations have declined over the period and instead it has become more common for information to solely be extracted from data storage media. This development is probably influenced by the pressure of increased demand, which makes investigation leaders reluctant to order more extensive examinations. The workload of digital forensics is also reflected in the fact that digital forensics technicians is the function among which the lowest percentage, 30 percent, feel they have time to do their job. Nine out of ten digital forensics technicians also see high workload as a major obstacle to achieve efficiency.

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<sup>1</sup> In the report, the term "investigation leaders" is used to refer to the functions of prosecutors and police officers who lead an investigation.

## Number of forensic examinations per investigation has increased

Overall, forensic production increased. More forensic examinations were conducted in 2021 than in 2017. Between 2019 and 2021, the number of completed examinations increased in line with the increase in human resources, indicating that the increase in resources has contributed to the increase in output. Despite the fact that in 2021 the number of examinations increased overall compared to 2017, the number of investigations including at least one forensic examination has not increased. This is shown in a previous report from Brå (2022a). This means that investigators will submit more forensic examinations per case in 2021 compared to 2017.

## Processing times for laboratory tests are increasing

The police's forensic activities have previously been criticised for excessive processing times, and Brå has therefore chosen to follow up on how these have developed during the period studied. Due to a lack of quality in the data available to Brå regarding processing times for forensic field work and digital forensics, this analysis only includes laboratory examinations. The results show that the average processing time at the NFC has increased throughout the time period studied, reaching a peak in mid-2021. The sharp increase in 2021 is mainly due to the Vilgot operation, which saw newly recruited human resources take up the many orders that had been received in previous years but remained unprocessed. While it is positive that they were addressed, the processing times for these cases were long, contributing to the anomalous peak in processing times in mid-2021. The evolution of processing times has been largely influenced by the speed with which drug-related cases are handled, as they represent about one third of all cases. The processing time for this category has clearly increased, from an average of just under two weeks at the beginning of the time period studied to an average of almost two months in 2021. The average processing time for serious offences has remained at a higher level throughout the period, varying between two and four months depending on the type of offence.

The number of examinations with priority has increased due to the introduction of Fast Track Legal Proceedings

Within the laboratory field, the numbers of examinations with priority has increased since 2017, from 10 to 18 percent. The reasons for an examination to be given priority may vary, but the common denominator is that they should be handled with extra urgency by the NFC. The increase is almost entirely due to the gradual introduction of the Fast Track Legal Proceedings<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fast Track Legal Proceedings is an approach which aims to reduce the time taken to process less serious volume crimes... The procedure has previously been evaluated by Brå (2020).

in the country in 2018 – 2021 and the creation of a separate priority category for investigations handled under this approach. Unlike other grounds for priority, which mainly involve serious offences, Fast Track Legal Proceedings largely concern police-initiated reports of volume crime such as drug possession. Since examinations for these cases can be handled relatively quickly, their inclusion has reduced the overall average processing time for expedited cases from 67 to 42 days over the period studied. Processing times for other priority reasons have varied over the period but has not decreased.

### Long processing times are seen as the main obstacle to efficient operations

Long processing times are the obstacle that the majority of respondents to the survey, irrespective of their position or branch of activity, see as a major impediment to efficient forensic and investigative activities. The long processing times not only affect investigation activities directly but also indirectly. Several investigation leaders report that they refrain from ordering forensic examinations because they believe that the processing time would be too long and instead allow functions outside the forensic operations to secure traces in mobile phones, for example, even if this entails a risk to quality.

### Lack of forensic understanding in investigative activities

The results of the Brå survey indicate that the forensic competence within the investigation activities varies between different positions and types of leads. The greatest need for development is in finding, managing and interpreting digital traces. The survey responses also suggest that investigation leaders are not getting the support they feel they need from the forensic specialists, particularly in relation to digital forensics.

A good understanding of what the forensic activities can assist with is also important for making adequate forensic examination orders. Previous studies have identified inadequate orders as an obstacle to efficient operations. The Brå study confirms this picture, however, providers<sup>3</sup> feel that quality has improved in recent years. The shortcomings that still exist are mainly that basic information is missing, such as case numbers, or that it is unclear what is being requested. When orders are inadequate, it takes time away from the providers to find the right information that could be spent on the examinations themselves. Providers also feel that skills for ordering adequate forensic examinations vary between different positions; it is considered good among investigation leaders, but worse among investigators and patrol officers. At the same time, it is the latter who usually order examinations.

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<sup>3</sup> In the Brå study, the term 'provider' is used for locus, forensic, IT forensics and laboratory forensics.

## Brå's assessment

Forensic operations play an important role in the Police Authority's ability to achieve its 2024 goal of successful crime prevention and detection. In this section, some suggestions follow on how the results of the present study can be used in the Police Authority's continued work to develop and streamline operations up to 2024.

### Forensic capacity needs to increase further

Forensic services play a central role by supporting investigative activities with forensic analysis. An overall impression of the study is that the capacity of the forensic activities is lagging behind, especially in the area of digital forensics. The NFC themselves has estimated the need for staff in all three areas of activity to be substantially higher than what is available today. While the need to increase forensic capacity is great, there are several challenges that make it difficult to expand capacity to the extent required. To begin with, the police have had difficulties recruiting digital forensics technicians. Several initiatives have been taken and Brå encourages the Police Authority to continue to review the possibilities of attracting more people with IT skills to the authority. After a period of reorganisation and high staff turnover in forensic units, it is also important to work to retain the expertise available within the agency. Finally, it is also important that the Police Authority's civilian share benchmark does not stand in the way of recruiting the right skills based on operational needs. Brå's recommendation is therefore that both the Police Authority and the Government should consider the usefulness of having such a benchmark.

### Increased clarity on which examinations to prioritise

Forensic activities do not currently have the capacity to cope with demand, even for priority cases. Brå also estimates that there is a grey area in terms of the overall need for forensic investigations, because investigators sometimes avoid ordering due to long processing times. It is therefore likely that demand will increase as capacity is expanded. The Police Authority therefore also needs to review the possibility of limiting the inflow so that the most urgent cases can be dealt with more quickly. It is largely a matter of reviewing the relevance of each individual order. Brå encourages the Police Authority to use the results of their own initiatives such as Exegi and Dictum in this work and to continue with similar initiatives to ensure an effective use of the resources of the forensic activities. Limiting the inflow into forensic activities may increase the incidence of trace management by staff without specialist forensic skills in lower priority cases. Limiting the inflow therefore requires improving the skills of other parts of the agency in order to reduce the risk of incorrect processing.



At the same time as the inflow is reviewed, the Police Authority should also consider how to use forensic resources as efficiently as possible so that the highest priority cases can be dealt with within a reasonable time. Today, the main tool available is the NFC's order of prioritisation, with police-initiated volume crime in Fast Track Legal Proceedings now being the most common reason. As the procedure is implemented in more areas it is unlikely that there share will decrease in the foreseeable future.

#### Review opportunities to improve efficiency

Forensic operations have been reviewed in several previous reports and the study by Brå shows that many of the shortcomings remain. This includes the fact that the content of forensic examination orders can still be improved. Investigation leaders need to be supported to be clearer about what they are asking for and to give providers the information they need. The ongoing development of Laboratory Information Management Systems (LIMS) can help here. Brå supports previous proposals that the entire forensic service should use the same LIMS and, in the long term, integrate it with the police's case management system. An integration of LIMS into the case management system would also reduce the risk of investigations being carried out for outdated cases. The police authority should also look at other ways of bridging the gap that still exists between forensic and investigative activities.

Finally, Brå would like to emphasise that there is a great need to improve the possibilities for monitoring activities. As noted in several places in the report, the quality of the data has caused Brå major problems both in terms of monitoring results and resources. This applies in particular to digital forensics and forensic field operations. There is also a lack of opportunities to analyse forensic activities in terms of their value for investigations, not least in terms of processing times. Today, the processing time measure does not correspond to the time that investigators actually wait for the results of investigations. Better possibilities for monitoring operations are a prerequisite if the Police Authority is to be able to prioritise and dimension forensic operations correctly in the continued investment until 2024.