

What is the problem represented to be in the Swedish police authority: A policy analysis

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Sweden has witnessed a rise in criminal activity, notably in organized crime, gang violence, and incidents like shootings and explosions. This trend has sparked considerable political and media debates, in Sweden and internationally. This paper analyses how the Swedish police authority comprehend the situation discursively. How do they define their role and mission in society? What problems do they identify? What goals and strategies do they propose, and what values are attached to these? This is illustrated by policy documents and website materials from the police authority. The results show three main problematizations: crime and crime fighting, working within the police organization, and relations between the police and citizens. Key findings are that the police authority represents crimes and the role of the police in different ways depending on what type of crime discussed, and that they connect various aspects of police work to non-repressive values, such as trust and safety.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a concerning rise in criminal activity in Sweden, in the realms of organized crime, criminal networks, gang violence, and associated incidents such as shootings and explosions (<https://polisen.se/om-polisen/polisens-arbete/sprangningar-och-skjutningar/>). This trend has garnered significant attention in national and international media. Sweden's once-sterling reputation as a safe and low-crime country has been overshadowed by disconcerting news about a surge in criminality, the emergency of vulnerable neighborhoods, recruitment of young children into criminal networks, and Sweden's unfortunate distinction as the 'capital of Europe' in terms of deadly shootings (e.g. see reporting in *The Times*).

Criminal development has become a highly politicized topic in Sweden, dominating media coverage and political debates. Following the arguments by scholars like Simon (2007) and Erikson (2007), it can be argued that crime in general, and organized crime and gang violence in particular, have become a central—perhaps even the central—organizing principle in Sweden. An alarmistic 'fear of crime' discourse has established, focusing on the assumed lack of perceived safety, even though general criminality has not increased (Lilja, 2022). The criminal development is often portrayed as a threat to general safety and to democratic values, as well as a threat to individuals, such as innocents being shot in gang-related conflicts or children being recruited to sell drugs and perform shootings for criminal networks. There is a

common understanding of the need for immediate and drastic action, although ideas about who and what should be done vary. Right-wing/conservative parties, more recently accompanied by the Social Democrats, emphasize the role of the police and law enforcement. They advocate for several legal changes, focusing on harsher punishments for criminals and increased control measures for the police. Another strategy is to allocate more resources to the police authority and substantially increase the number of police officers to restore safety in society. Notably, the Swedish parliament has recently decided to introduce 'visitation zones' that will provide the police with a wider mandate on force-related measures such as visitation of people and search warrants of vehicles, without specific suspicion of crime. Many of the public discussions are intricately linked to contentious debates about immigration and ethnic groups, and whether integration politics have fallen short and contributed to rising criminality by exacerbating social divides and giving rise to what is often referred to as a parallel society. Previous research has also highlighted how the Swedish political parties use highly emotional arguments in their debates about criminal policy (Hermansson, 2023).

A starting point for this article is the recognition that there are numerous, often conflicting ideas about the causes of the criminal development in Sweden and how to effectively address criminality such as organized crime, gang violence, and shootings. Despite the diversity of opinions, there are high expectations on

the police to contribute to concrete solutions and to implement government-prescribed measures and remedies. Nevertheless, there is an under explored perspective, which is how the Swedish police authority comprehend the situation. How do they define their role and mission in society? What problems do they identify? What goals and strategies do they propose, and what values are attached to these? In this article, we will illustrate how the Swedish police authority represent these aspects discursively in policy documents and on their website. This is primarily an exploratory study, aiming to contribute to the academic discussion about the role of the police in society, particularly in how they view themselves in relation to challenges such as organized crime and shootings—topics that are high on the political agenda not only in Sweden but in many other countries.

FRAMEWORK

Since the perspective in this article is from the view of the Swedish police authority, our general framework focuses on the role of the police and basic assumptions in contemporary police work. In the discussion, we will situate the results in relation to criminological research.

The police are often considered as a cornerstone in maintaining social order. Yet, the maintenance of public peace and order is fundamentally embedded in deeper economic, political, and cultural dynamics, where only a fraction of social order preservation can be attributable to the work of the police (Manning, 2003). Over time, police institutions have gradually shifted focus from an idea of policing, where crime control was thought to be best established by inducing fear of punishment among the public (Tyler, 2004), to the emphasis on voluntary cooperation between the police and the public (Hamm et al., 2017). Thus, police institutions have come to realize that they are dependent on public cooperation to perform well. A considerable body of research has highlighted how public cooperation with the police is highly determined by public perceptions of the police and that favorable perception to a large extent steams from people's feeling of the police as just and fair (Boateng et al., 2022; Khatchatourian et al., 2022; Koster, 2017; Tyler and Jackson, 2014). If people view the police as exercising their authority in a procedural just way, this will enhance public trust and thus increase police legitimacy (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2004). In democratic societies, police legitimacy is of crucial importance, since the police work is on behalf of the people and that people recognize and accept the police authorities power of using coercive force (Tyler, 2006). The position of the police, the exceptional discretionary power along with the power to, when necessary, use coercive force brings potentially harmful implications. The misuse of coercive power can easily erode trust and consequently police legitimacy, leading people less prone to cooperate with the police, which affects their ability to fight crime.

MATERIALS AND ANALYSIS

To illustrate how the Swedish police authority comprehends current criminal development discursively, we decided to analyse publicly available policy documents from the Swedish police authority, including statements about how they formulate their mission and role in society. We identified 16 such documents

(listed at the end). To supplement this material, we included materials from the website (www.polisen.se), as it is an important part of their strategic communication. We selected the sections *About the police*, *Work and education*, and *Victim of crimes*, including sub-sections and links (downloaded May 2023). However, it is important to note that these materials only represent fractions of how the police authority present themselves and communicate with different audiences. For example, they publish press releases, use social medias, and key representatives participate in various media.

The materials are written and analyzed in Swedish language. The focus has been on the texts, but some of the materials include visual components (such as photos, videos, and illustrations) relevant for the scope of the study and, as a result, were included in the analysis. Translations from English to Swedish language were carried out in the last phase of the analysis by the authors.

For the analysis, we took inspiration from Bacchis (2012) *What's the Problem Represented to Be* (WPR) approach. This is an approach that can be described as an analysis of discourses, rather than discourse analysis/theory in a strict sense (Bacchi, 2005). By analyzing policy proposals and other prescriptive texts, we aimed to gain knowledge about how certain issues become political problems. Similar to Sergis (2017) approach, our analysis focused on the intentions of the Swedish police authority.

The WPR approach assumes that what one suggests doing about something reveals what one considers as problematic or in need of change. Furthermore, it assumes that policies contain implicit representations of problems. In our study, we consider the policy documents as well as the website material as such prescriptive texts. Bacchi suggests six interrelated questions in the analysis. First, what is the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies? Second, what presuppositions and assumptions underlie this representation? Third, how have this representation come about? Fourth, what is silenced or left out? Fifth, what effects are produced by this representation? Sixth, how and where is this representation produced, disseminated, and defended? These questions may overlap, and it is not always necessary to ask all of them. Based on our aim and research questions, we focused on the first, second, and fourth WPR questions.

We coded and analyzed the materials using the MAXQDA software. In the first step, we identified segments concerning problem representations, goals, strategies, and values. The problem representations were categorized into three overarching problematization, each including many sub-themes and codes. In later steps, we asked the analytical questions mentioned above to the material, focusing on both content and linguistic features in the texts. In these later steps, we also analyzed the visual representations and assessed how they supported the identified problematizations.

RESULTS

Crime and crime fighting

The first overarching problematization arises from the fact that the Swedish police authority is obligated by law and governmental regulations to manage crime and promote security

in society. The Swedish police law states: 'The police authority's duties include preventing, averting, and detecting against criminal activity and other disturbances of public order or security' ((1984:387) 2 § 1 p). Stating the legal basis to legitimize the police's mission is a prominent feature in several of the policy documents and on the website. For example, the introduction to the strategic business plan begins by declaring: 'The police's mission and goals are set out, among other things, in the Police Act (1984:387), the police ordinance (2014:1104) and the ordinance (2014:1102) with instructions for the police authority' (*Strategisk verksamhetsplan 2020-2024*, p. 5). On the website, the governance of the police authority is explained as follows: 'The parliament decides through law how the police should work and what the police should do' (<https://polisen.se/om-polisen/uppdrag-och-mal/styrning-av-polisen/>), and the goal of criminal policy is to reduce crime and increase people's security. In other words, the general mission of the police is presented as a fact and the governance is depicted as occurring externally, through parliamentary decisions.

The strategic business plan encompasses three overarching goals for the police authority, with the first one focussed on effectively combating crime and achieving a successful clearance rate. This goal is prominently featured in most of the policy documents and presented as a fact. In various versions of the strategic plan, the goal is nuanced, and specific types of crimes are identified as priorities for the upcoming period. In the version from 2019, the overall goal is expressed in as reducing the number of citizens exposed to crimes and increasing the rate of solved crimes. Prioritized areas include improving clearance rates for crimes against vulnerable victims, enhancing border policing, particularly in the context of combating international criminality, addressing terrorism and extremism, and strengthening crisis management for handling significant events, crisis, or wars. In the version from 2023, some of these priorities remain, but there are notable rephrased objectives and additions. The focus on vulnerable crime victims has evolved into the goal of combating violence against children and violence against women by men. A new objective is to address lethal violence linked to criminal networks, and there are several additions concerning improved border policing and national security. It is emphasized that the evolving situation in Sweden and the world, especially in the light of the war in Ukraine and Sweden's potential NATO membership, places higher demands on the police authority. They need to prepare for a more extensive role within the framework of total defense. The expectations are summarized as follows:

The societal mission of the police—to guarantee the safety of the population and our country's internal security—is, in several ways, more important than ever. The expectations placed on us are high. (*Nästa steg*, p. 3)

The police authority problematizes different types of crimes in distinct ways and portrays the role of the police differently depending on the nature of the crime. Some crimes, such as organized criminality, criminal networks, and deadly violence, are mainly understood from a societal perspective. Organized

criminality is identified as a severe threat to society and democracy: 'The organized criminality is a threat to peoples security, to the open society and democracy' (*Polismyndighetens strategiska verksamhetsplan 2020-2024*, p. 5), and deadly violence associated with criminal networks has the potential to erode trust in society over time. These crimes are linked to broader societal changes and recent developments in criminal activity, and they are presented as examples of complex criminality that require more from the police. It is highlighted that the police have enhanced their capabilities in terms of analysis and prosecution, but:

[. . .] the capabilities of the criminals have increased even more rapidly. To stop this progression, it is necessary for several actors in society to work together to collectively push back against serious crime. (<https://polisen.se/om-polisen/polisens-arbete/sprangningar-och-skjutningar>)

Working together with other actors in society, the police must prevent the recruitment of individuals to criminal networks and impede ongoing criminal activities: 'The police authority must proactively direct its efforts towards strategic arenas, individuals, and groups to reduce violence, whether it involves shootings, knife violence, or explosions' (*Polismyndighetens strategiska verksamhetsplan 2020-2024*, p. 17). It is emphasized that the police authority has established collaboration with 12 other authorities in Sweden to ensure 'efficient and sustained operations to combat serious organized crime' (<https://polisen.se/om-polisen/polisens-arbete/organisera-rad-brottslighet>). In this part of the problematization, police work is associated with values such as being systematic, prioritized, strategic, collaborative, and intelligence led.

In contrast, crimes against children and men's serious violence against women, as well as Internet-related sexual crimes against children, are primarily understood as individual problems, something that affects 'thousands of people' (*Polismyndighetens strategiska verksamhetsplan 2020-24*, s. 5). Concerning crimes against individuals, the protective role of the police is emphasized. It is pointed out that it is crucial to protect the most vulnerable citizens to maintain trust. On the website, there are numerous segments signalling that the police are for the citizens and that their role is to help and protect. For example, in the section on crimes against children and young people, it is stated: 'The police are there for you and will help you if you or someone you know has been victimized. It's always okay to tell, even if someone says you shouldn't' (polisen.se/utsatt-for-brott/olika-typer-av-brott/brott-mot-barn-och-unga). Moreover, there are several sections that emphasize the seriousness of these crimes and that the police is trustworthy and empathetic in vulnerable situations. In the section about crimes in a close relationship, it is stated:

For the police, there is no doubt. Exposing a loved one to violence, threats, or violations is a serious crime. If you or someone you know—adult or child—is at risk, come to us. We understand that it is not easy but contacting us can be a step on the way. (polisen.se/utsatt-for-brott/olika-typer-av-brott/brott-i-nara-relation)

The sections on the website regarding crimes against individuals stand out in many ways. They include links to crime victim

support, external organizations, and authorities (like the social service and civil organizations). Moreover, visual representations of victims (like a lone child, photographed from the back, on an empty school yard in the darkness), personal stories from victims (referred to as 'stories from the reality', accompanied by genre photos of people in different age, genders, and ethnicity), and a video featuring investigating police officers (titled 'This is us you meet', were two investigators, one man and one woman, share personal experiences of encounters with crime victims) are used to support the image of the police as trustworthy and empathetic. Although the strategic business plan states that the police need to work on crime prevention and 'identify potential perpetrators of violence early' (*Polismyndighetens strategiska verksamhetsplan 2020-24*, p. 5) and outline strategies (such as a specific working model), relatively little is said about practical police work on how to prevent these crimes. Instead, the focus is on how to support crime victims and the importance of earning trust from the citizens.

Working within the police authority

The second overarching problematization entails representations of police work that are intricately linked to the organization of policework and employment within the police authority. It is essential to consider the background of the re-organization of the Swedish police authority in 2015, when 21 police authorities were transformed to a single council authority, comprising of seven regions and several specialized departments. In the preface to the strategic business plan, the re-organization is portrayed as a journey: 'In recent years, Swedish police have embarked on a journey that few other authorities have' (*Polismyndighetens strategiska verksamhetsplan 2020-2024*, p. 4). This statement signifies that the re-organization of the police has posed, and continues to pose, significant challenges.

A central part of this problematization is the insufficient number of employees within the police authority. Several of the policy documents, such as the strategic business plan and the growth strategy outline a goal to increase the number of employees by 10,000 over the next 8–9 years. In the latest version of the strategic business plan, this goal is placed in an EU context, underscoring that the Swedish police still has fewer police officers than the EU average. The increase in the number of employees is presented as necessary condition for achieving the police authority's top-priority goals.

Employees are consistently identified as the key resource for the police authority, and being an attractive working place and cooperation partner is identified as the third overarching goal for the police authority. This goal is presented in terms of establishing a work environment where employees are not only encouraged to stay and develop but also make the police authority appealing to new colleagues. Throughout the website and in the policy documents, the terms 'employees' and 'colleagues' are frequently used. It is emphasized that the police authority encompasses of, and relies on, a wide range of competences and professions, extending beyond police officers. On the website, under the *Work within the police agency* section, there is a list of various roles and units, such as civil investigator, IT, forensic, communication, and law. Working as a civilian employee is presented as a mean to contribute to a safer society and to make

difference in people's lives. Additionally, it is linked to positive values, including updated and specialized competence, meaningfulness, creativity, commitment, collaboration, variety, and efficiency. Simultaneously, several statements underscore what is considered the core business of the police authority, which here is understood as combatting everyday crime, serving as patrolling police officers, and working in outer service. What constitutes the core business is also communicated indirectly, by stressing the supportive roles of civilian employees.

The role of police officers is portrayed in a multifaceted manner, with numerous career opportunities: 'Regardless of if you want to become an intervention police officer, crime investigator or part of the task force, the police is an important, varied and stimulating profession' (<https://polisen.se/jobb-och-utbildning/bli-polis/arbets-som-polis>). The police authority highlights the diversity inherent in this profession, offering more than 80 different roles within the organization. Visual representations strongly support the view of police work as diverse and taking place in various settings. For instance, under the section *Work as a police officer*, there is a slideshow featuring photos. These images include armed and masked police officers managing public events, officers monitoring traffic, close-up shots of helmets and helicopters, and smiling police officers standing beside patrol cars on sunny days. Additionally, there are collections of films titled '83 Reasons to Become a Police Officer', available on both the website and YouTube. These films offer snapshots of daily police work, narrated by police officers with different roles, such as patrolling police, horse riding police, and dog handlers. They share their personal experiences and motivations for becoming and working as police officers. Overall, the photos and films represent police work in active and challenging situations, like interventions at sporting events, street patrols, and interaction with young people in public spaces. There are numerous depictions of training situations, emphasizing the physical and mental strength required, as well as the importance of collaboration among colleagues. Most of the visual representations of police officers incorporates elements such as uniforms, hats, helmets, masks, security vests, police emblems, equipment (such as weapons, cars, and various hand devices), and animals. Furthermore, the photos depict police officers of diverse ethnic backgrounds, genders, and ages. In some cases, it is highlighted how staff challenge stereotypical expectations regarding who can be a police officer and how they are perceived. For example, one male police officer shares his background as a refugee, living in a refugee settlement and later in a vulnerable area. He initially had concerns about how he would be received: 'I was the first foreigner, he says'. However, he was pleasantly surprised by the warm welcome and support he received from his colleagues. They had been eager for his arrival (polisen.se/jobb-och-utbildning/bli-polis/arbets-som-polis/poliser-berattar-listsida/sagt-om-jobbet-nadim). In contrast, civilian staff are more often presented in non-dramatic situations, typically in office or laboratory environments. They are often shown engaged in conversations with colleagues, working at their desks, or represented by genre photos of objects, such as law books and headsets. These photos often include symbols, like logos and emblems, showing the context of the police authority.

Working within the police authority is consistently associated with a set of positive values that include qualities like efficiency,

professionalism, accessibility, quality, creativity, personal development, inclusion, commitment, safety, societal benefit, and meaningfulness. In certain documents, such as the ethical policy and the policy for basic values, specific values such as commitments, efficiency, and availability are identified as guiding principles for the staff. The personal stories and interviews featured on the website primarily highlight the rewarding aspects of police work. These stories emphasize moments when it is possible to assist citizens and crime victims, build trust, especially among youths and residents in vulnerable areas, or provides support to individuals in threatening situations, such as those enduring long-term violence in close relationships. A telling example on how the police agency underscores the meaningfulness of police work can be seen in the recruitment of police students, where they use the slogan: 'Is this your greater task?' (<https://polisen.se/jobb-och-utbildning/bli-polis/>).

In the policy documents, there are many strategies on how the police authority should achieve the general goal of becoming an attractive workplace and collaboration partner as well as the numerical goals for the expansion of the authority. One of the most elaborated strategies, aside from recruiting students for police education, is aimed at attracting former police officers to return. The website states that the police authority is growing and welcomes former police officers to come back. There is a dedicated section for rehiring, including information on how to contact police regions and apply for jobs, answers to common questions, and interviews with returning police officers about their backgrounds and motivations for returning. Among the arguments presented, there are compelling messages like 'You are needed' and 'Once a police officer, always a police officer' (<https://polisen.se/jobb-och-utbildning/jobba-hos-polisen/ateranstallning-av-poliser>), emphasizing the meaningfulness of police work and a strong professional identity. In several statements, the police authority is responding to dissatisfaction from former employees and is actively working to address various issues. For example, they state:

The police authority works towards becoming an increasingly attractive workplace. Many efforts are made to attract new and retain existing employees, such as increasing the ob [additional salary for nights and holidays] allowances. (<https://polisen.se/jobb-och-utbildning/jobba-hos-polisen/ateranstallning-av-poliser>)

Additionally, the police authority formulates general strategies, such as fostering a 'healthy organizational culture', to which all employees are expected to contribute (*Polismyndighetens etiska policy*, p. 8). To foster an organizational culture, characterized by equal treatment, is also identified as important to 'increase trust in the police authority in society' (*Polismyndighetens strategi för kultur och likabehandling*, p. 5). This problematization, and the different strategies, is mainly from the perspective of the police authority. However, the overarching goal remains the top priority for the police, namely, to successfully combat crime and achieve a high clearance rate.

Relations between the police and the citizens

The third overarching problematization is focussed on relations between the police and the citizens, often with the citizen

perspective in the foreground. In many of the policy documents, as well as on the website, communication, and meetings with citizens are presented as prerequisites for fundamental police work. For instance:

Through conversations and meetings with people, we all contribute to carrying out our mission. When we communicate with citizens, we receive reports, tips, and witness information that can help us solve crimes. (*Kommunikationspolicy för polismyndigheten*, p. 3)

According to the policy documents, meetings should be adapted to the needs and abilities of citizens as well as to the urgency of the crime. The police should be accessible, easy to get in touch with, and citizens should have opportunities to choose forms of communication (e.g. by phone, digital self-service, or physical meetings). The citizen perspective is even more specified in strategies regarding language and forms of communication. Language is supposed to follow the Swedish language law [Språklag 2009:600], which states that language in the public sector must be polite, simple, and comprehensible. In the policy documents, it is emphasized that language should be careful and adapted to the receiver. Other strategies for citizen meetings focus on the forms of interaction, like opening hours and the development of digital solutions. In general, meetings and communication with citizens are attached to values such as efficiency, availability, visibility, trust, safety, respect, responsiveness, and legality. Especially the connection between communication and meetings with citizens and trust building is highlighted:

A high level of trust in the police authority is necessary to succeed in the mission. Trust is built through dialogue and meetings that are characterized by good treatment, efficient execution, and need-based availability. (*Polismyndighetens strategi för medborgarmötet*, p. 4)

The second overall goal for the police authority is to establish a 'a strong local presence'. This goal is presented as a prerequisite to achieving the general mission of the police authority and the ability to prioritize resources. In the strategic business plan, this goal is specified as having more police officers present in the local community (a goal, that in turn, is connected to the need of more police officers), the development of initiatives such as 'civic promises' and 'civic dialogues', as well as preventing the emergence of new vulnerable neighbourhoods and reducing existing ones. The goal of having a strong local presence is closely linked to the vision 'Your police—makes the whole Sweden safe and secure', a slogan used on the website and in the brochure *Nästa steg*. Under this slogan it is emphasized that the police are for everyone and should be accessible and present throughout the entire country: "Your police" establish a personal approach and sends the message that the police are everyone's police' (*Nästa steg*, p. 6).

An important background for the strategies related to civic promises and civic dialogues is the concept 'vulnerable areas' that the police authority started to use in 2015. These areas are geographically defined areas 'characterized by a low socioeconomic status where the criminals have an impact on the local

community' (<https://polisen.se/om-polisen/polisens-arbete/utsatta-omraden/>), and they are identified at three levels: vulnerable areas, risk areas, and particularly exposed areas. The impact on the local community is predominantly rooted in the social context rather than being solely driven by criminals seeking power and territorial control. However, the repercussions of criminal activities, such as open drug dealing and public violence, instill a pervasive sense of insecurity among residents, discouraging them from reporting crimes or engaging in legal processes. The particularly exposed areas are characterized by:

[. . .] a general reluctance to participate in the legal process. There may also be systematic threats and acts of violence against witnesses, injured parties, and whistleblowers in the area. The situation in the area means that it is difficult or almost impossible for the police to complete their mission, which requires regular adaptation of working methods or equipment. (<https://polisen.se/om-polisen/polisens-arbete/utsatta-omraden/>)

In general, lack of perceived safety in particular areas is identified as a serious societal problem, a threat to the legal system, and a motive for strong local presence in order to build trust among citizens.

In most of the policy documents as well as on the website, 'citizens' is used as a general term, in a taken for granted way. Sometimes it is used synonymous to 'people'. However, in the strategy plan for citizen meetings, citizens are defined to 'everyone that meets the police regardless of citizenship. It may be private individuals or legal entities such as associations, companies, or authorities' (*Polismyndighetens strategi för medborgarmötet*, p. 8). Although it is not explicitly stated, this definition is likely included with the background of current political debates about citizenship and migration, where different types of limitations have been on the agenda (e.g. implementing higher demands for citizenship). The definition is a statement about that the police is for everyone, and that the police authority applies an inclusive understanding of citizens. Defining this concept can be understood as part of a broader problematization in the material, especially visible in the material directed to a wider audience, such as the website, namely who the police are for and if the police can be trusted or not.

DISCUSSION

As indicated in the introduction, there are many, sometimes conflicting, ideas about the criminal development in Sweden, as well as about the role and expectations placed on the police. Following the arguments by Côté-Lussier (2013), there is a constant contest over policing—of which actors are (or should be) involved, what means are used, and for what purposes. This contest takes place in many contexts and on many platforms, where mainstream media as well as social media play crucial roles (e.g. Bullock, 2018; Czudnochowski and Ludewig, 2023; Ellis, 2021; Lee and McGovern, 2013). In this article we have illustrated how the Swedish police authority represent their role and mission in policy documents and on their website. Furthermore, we have examined how they define problems, goals, strategies, and the values associated with these representations. To summarize, we identified three overarching problematizations: crime and crime

fighting, working within the police authority, and the relationship between the police and citizens.

The first problematization, concerning crime and crime fighting, is expected, given that the role and mission of the Swedish police are defined by laws and regulations from the Swedish government. This also underlies the other problematizations. Regardless of the strategies the police authority formulate to attract and retain staff, communicate with citizens, or establish a local presence in neighbourhoods, the overarching goals, and the legitimacy of the police authority, ultimately come down to effectively combating crime and enhancing public safety. Ideas of policing effectiveness, in terms of being effective at combating crimes and keeping the public safe, is generally consistent with how police officers think of themselves and their role (e.g. Charman, 2018; Rantatalo, 2016) and can be contrasted with ideas on lawfulness, often stressed by policymakers and politicians (Meares, 2018).

A key finding is that the Swedish police authority discusses different types of crimes in distinct ways and portrays the role of the police differently depending on the nature of the crime. Organized crimes, gang criminality, and various forms of deadly violence are presented as societal problems. This aligns with broader theories about how crime risks rule not only individual lives, but whole societies (Ericson, 2007; Simon, 2007). Organized crimes are depicted as severe threats to the open democratic society and security, and at the core of strategic police work. In this context, it is worth noting that the term organized crime is relatively new in Sweden. Until the late 1970s it was mostly used to describe foreign criminality, and later as something relatively rare (Gunnarson and Rostami, 2019). Distinct characteristics, such as being international and crossing borders, contributes to the understanding of these crimes as complex, demanding, and rapidly evolving. Organized crimes are described as something that the police cannot solve on their own—although police work related to these crimes simultaneously is depicted in terms of being proactive, intelligence led, and strategic. In general, these findings align with previous research arguing that there is a consolidating discourse about organized (and mafia-related) crimes as more serious and sophisticated because of their transnational character (Carrapico, 2014; Sergi, 2017; Sergi and Rizuti, 2023). It has also been highlighted that organized crimes are 'ethicized' discursively, pointing at links between specific ethnic groups and certain types of crimes as part of othering strategies (Arsovska, 2021; Eski and Sergi, 2023). However, in the materials analysed here it is clear that the police authority avoid drawing links between ethnicity—or other collectives or identities—and organized crimes.

In contrast to organized crimes, crimes against individuals, such as violence against women and children, are primarily framed as individual problems, either affecting victims directly or those close to them. Similar individualistic discourses have been found in media reporting (Karlsson et al., 2021). When discussing these crimes, the protective role of the police is at the centre, with significant attention focussed on establishing the image of the police as a trustworthy and emphatic actor.

In accordance with our general framework (e.g. Hamm et al., 2017; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler and Jackson, 2014), the Swedish police authority recognizes trust and cooperation with citizens as necessary conditions to achieve their mission and

goals. In all three problematizations, numerous examples highlight how the police authority portrays itself as a trustworthy, safe, fair, committed, and empathetic actor. Especially in the problematization focussing on the relations between the police and the citizens, trust-building strategies are articulated, for example, regarding strong local presence and accessible communication. They are also transparent about challenges related to trust, such as difficulties for crime victims and witnesses may face when deciding whether to trust the police in specific situations, like reporting a crime. This dilemma is well known from police research (e.g. Birdsall *et al.*, 2017; Patterson, 2011; Wright and Powell, 2007) and also shown in recent studies of youths and minority groups in Sweden (Pettersson, 2014; Saarikkomäki *et al.*, 2021; Wallengren *et al.*, 2023; Wasterfors and Alm, 2020).

On the website, the police authority effectively humanize staff—especially police officers—by using personal stories, portrayal photos, films showing snapshots from daily police work, and personalized messages (like ‘this is us you meet’), often representing the police in interaction with citizens (cf. O’Connor and Zaidi, 2020) or as present in hypothetical crime situations. Moreover, working in the police authority is generally associated to positive and non-repressive values like meaningfulness, commitment, creativity, variety, and efficiency. This resemble with how the police use social media to humanize and offer a sense of protection (Ralph, 2022; Sjöberg *et al.*, 2023) and to produce legitimate and positive images of the organization (Kudla and Parnaby, 2018; O’Connor and Zaidi, 2020). Similar to findings by Lee and McGovern (2013) are these strategies both directed to the public and to the police.

While some of the representations of police work are stereotypical, reinforcing the image of police officers engaged in traditional crime-fighting duties, it is evident that the police authority also seeks to establish counter-images (cf. Walby and Wilkinson, 2023). These counter-images aim to expand the understanding of what police work entails, encompassing various roles and competences, and challenging preconceptions about who is expected to work within the authority, for example, regarding gender and ethnicity. Many of the visual representations, especially on the website, can be interpreted as responses to general critiques of the police as powerless, ineffective, or non-representative, by portraying the police not only as powerful, in a stereotypical way, but also as being present in neighbourhoods and engaged in interactions with citizens. It can also be argued that the visual materials are carefully curated (cf. Dolamore *et al.*, 2022; Sjöberg *et al.*, 2023; Walby and Wilkinson, 2023).

Although the Swedish police authority identify combatting organized crime as one of its top priorities, most of the discursive representations in the materials stand in contrast to ‘fear of crime’ discourses, dominating in media reporting and Swedish politics (Heber, 2011; Lilja, 2022), connecting police work with values like trust, safety, meaningfulness, and collaboration. To some extent this can be explained by the nature of the documents, in being policy documents and website materials, serving internal and external needs. As with all public authorities in Sweden, there are requirements for being objective, fair, just, and respectful, and, as discussed above, the general goals are politically defined—why it would be surprising to find strong emotional arguments or explicit normative conclusions in these documents. How-

ever, the contrast between the general alarmistic discourse on criminality and how the police authority defines themselves may present challenges in implementing political decisions regarding the mission of the police and to gain and uphold necessary trust from citizens.

POLICY DOCUMENTS

- Nästa steg för svensk polis (broschüre, 2019)
- Polisens uppdragskompass (ua)
- Polismyndighetens arbetsmiljöplan 2023–2024 - arbetsmiljöplan inklusive arbetsmiljöpolicy, arbetsmiljömål och arbetsmiljöstrategi (Diarienummer: A191.946/2022)
- Polismyndighetens etiska policy (Diarienummer: A588.597/2019)
- Polismyndighetens kommunikationspolicy (PM 2015:58)
- Polismyndighetens medarbetarpolicy (PM 2015:3)
- Polismyndighetens miljöplan, Långsiktig plan inklusive miljöpolicy och strategisk inriktning för miljöarbetet 2021–2024 (Diarienummer: A543.712/2022)
- Polismyndighetens organisation, regioner och nationella avdelningar (ua)
- Polismyndighetens policy om arbetsmiljö (PM 2015:10)
- Polismyndighetens policy om verksamhetsskydd (PM 2015:21)
- Polismyndighetens strategi för det brottsförebyggande arbetet (Diarienummer: A153.079/2020)
- Polismyndighetens strategi för kultur och likabehandling (Diarienummer: A588.042/2021)
- Polismyndighetens strategi för medborgarmötet (Diarienummer: A448.047/2021)
- Polismyndighetens strategiska verksamhetsplan 2020–2024 (Diarienummer: A354.025/2022)
- Polismyndighetens tillväxtstrategi (PM 2020:9)
- Polismyndighetens värdegrund (PM 2015:2)
- Strategisk verksamhetsplan 2020–2024 (PM 2019:41)

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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