

# Reforming the Policing of Public Order in Sweden: Combining Research and Practice

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**Abstract** Following disturbances during the EU summit in Gothenburg in 2001, the Swedish police adopted a new concept, called special police tactics, for the policing of public order. In 2006, the Swedish National Police Board decided to start a 3-year project to develop a long term strategy for knowledge development with regard to these tactics, integrating research, training, and practice. This article reports on the set up and results of this reform project. Changes in the planning, carrying out and evaluation of police operations at major events were observed. The project provided a theoretical foundation for the special police tactics and a practical evaluation method for continuous knowledge development. The project methodology contributed to a developmental climate in the special police tactics organization. The project work also reinforced the basis for public order policing of crowds, to contribute to upholding constitutional rights of assembly and freedom of speech.

## Introduction

The special Committee of Inquiry (*Göteborgsko mmittén*) investigating the serious public order disturbances during the EU summit in Gothenburg in 2001 identified serious flaws regarding the way Swedish police were trained to intervene against crowds, noted knowledge deficiencies among the police and the use of different tactical models by units from different parts of Sweden, which led to coordination problems. According to the Committee, new working methods to deal with major events were needed within the Swedish police, based on non-confrontation, de-escalation, and prevention of violence. It was considered essential for a nationally uniform model to be developed with regard to interventions against crowds.

In order to avoid mass arrests or the need to take large numbers into custody, it should also prioritize interventions against specific individuals. For this, the Committee argued, the police require a high level of competence in social issues (such as a knowledge of political movements and of ways in which political opinion may manifest itself) and also in communication and conflict management. Furthermore, it was seen as of the utmost importance that commanders are given thorough training and practice. The police's dialogue with political organizations and other interest groups was seen as of major importance for the prevention of serious public disorder. Police should work actively to ensure that the use of dialogue as a method became a natural part of the organization (SOU 2002:122, pp. 22–25).

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Most studies on the maintenance of public order occur after the event has taken place (the report of the Gothenburg Committee is just one of many examples). The Gothenburg Committee was not the first and certainly not the last to come up with similar recommendations after public order disturbances. In 2009, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) performed a review of the policing of protest in the UK following concerns raised regarding the policing of protests in the City of London on 1 and 2 April 2009 during the G20 London Summit. The conclusions of the HMIC are eerily similar to those reached 8 years before by the Gothenburg Committee in Sweden (HMIC, 2009).<sup>1</sup> Hoggett and Stott (2012), talking about the challenge of change post G20 in the UK, stressed the need for evidence based policing, but they do not make clear how this should be achieved.

In Sweden, the report of the Gothenburg Committee led to the development of a new national tactical concept for policing crowds in Sweden (Special Police Tactics SPT).<sup>2</sup> The basis for the reform was a move away from previous large formations of armoured police officers. Instead, protection was to be sought in specially prepared vehicles. Instead of charges against masses of people, the focus would be on arresting people who were committing crimes. Lead words for the new, 'mobile', tactic were legality, flexibility,

resolution of conflicts, and security for the individual police officer. That also meant that, without changing the responsibilities of the 21 county police authorities, the national responsibility was emphasized through standardized education and a regular national reinforcement organization—which not only included, as before, special intervention teams, but also dialogue and specialized commanding officers.<sup>3</sup> The primary role of the dialogue police is to act as a communication link between demonstrators and police commanders with the goal of facilitating protesters' legitimate intentions, identifying potential risks to public order and avoiding confrontation. In the development of the dialogue part (or 'situationally adapted conflict management') part of the SPT, use was made of scientific knowledge (Holgersson and Knutsson, 2011). This use of scientific knowledge represents a positive exception to the rule that, generally, police public order practice is mainly based on outdated crowd theories. Internationally speaking, there is a huge gap between scientific research and police practice as far as public order policing is concerned (e.g. Schweingruber, 2000; Adang, 2006; Hoggett and Stott, 2012).

Given this state of affairs, in 2006 the Swedish National Police Board decided to start a 3 year national project to evaluate and further develop Special Police Tactics and to strengthen the link between practice and science with regard to

<sup>1</sup> The HMIC concludes the following: An absence of clear standards on the use of force for individual officers operating in the public order policing environment; A disconnection between individual officer safety training and public order training; A variation across forces in levels of understanding of the law and proper use of public order police powers; Inconsistent approaches and tactics across police forces; Inconsistent equipment; Lack of public order command capability; Out of date training and guidance; Inadequate training in the law, including human rights and police public order powers; Inappropriate use of public order powers; Uncertainty about the governance and accountability mechanisms best suited to support public order policing at both the national and local levels.

<sup>2</sup> Special police tactics is a combination of two elements (Polishöskolan, 2005):

1. the *mobile operations concept*, based on the Danish police mobile concept, which was developed following experiences similar to those of Sweden;
2. 'situationally adapted conflict management', the guiding principles is that of not allowing oneself to be provoked.

<sup>3</sup> During 2005–2006 the Swedish National Police Academy trained 51 special tactics tutors in the mobile operations concept, who then trained 1200 police officers that constitute the special national reinforcement unit. From 2006 commanders were trained as well as plain cloth arresting officers and dialogue police. The special police tactics were used in full from the spring of 2007 when the specially reinforced vehicles were delivered and the drivers were trained.

public order policing, to monitor the implementation of SPT and to study the effects of its application in practice, to continuously adapt and improve when necessary and to link developments in Sweden with international developments. The SPT-project aimed to develop a long-term strategy for knowledge development, which integrates research, training, and practice. Integrating these three areas in a strategy was new and had not been applied in this form previously within the Swedish police. Its objectives were:

- to increase knowledge about the factors that contribute to effective police operations,
- to increase integration of practical and theoretical knowledge,
- to increase use of research results within the field in police training (both initial and continuous training).

This article can be seen as a case study of how police reform in the domain of public order policing was handled in Sweden and how research and practice interacted with each other to achieve the desired objectives. The first part of the article will detail the activities undertaken as part of the so-called SPT-project, with special emphasis on the peer review field study methodology being used. Next, some impressions from these field studies will be dealt with, followed by an evaluation of the project according to different stakeholders. At the end of the article, conclusions will be drawn about factors conducive to police reform and the cooperation between practitioners and scientists.

## Activities undertaken by the SPT project

### Establishment of SPT knowledge development project group

The SPT project ran during the period January 2007–April 2010 and was carried out by a project group (the SPT knowledge development project group) headed by the author and composed of

police officers (one each of the three biggest cities in Sweden with SPT trained units), two researchers (from Linköping University) and instructors of the Swedish national Police Academy. The work of the project group was supervised by a steering committee chaired by the National Police Board and composed of representatives from six police counties and the criminal police division, a police union, the defence ministry, the civil contingencies agency, and the national board of health and welfare. The steering committee was advised by a reference group composed of representatives from the police, a university, the defence academy, and the national police academy.

### Competency profiles

One of the first activities was the development of job descriptions and competency profiles for strategic, operational, tactical and group commanders, group members and staff chiefs in the national reinforcement organization, as well as for dialogue police, supporter police, and plain cloth arrest officers. The profiles were intended for selection use and as a basis for development of training. A standard methodology was developed by the Institute for Personnel and Company development (IPF) from Uppsala. Drafts of the profiles were discussed with practitioners during two workshops and one seminar. In total 150 persons coming from the relevant functions within the reinforcement organization participated in these sessions.

### Literature study

A literature study was carried out to identify knowledge based conflict reducing principles for policing crowds and principles for managing large scale police operations that could form the theoretical basis for choices made in public order management. Modern research shows that civil unrest and violence in a crowd develop as a consequence of *processes between groups and within groups*. The interaction between the police and the crowd has a major role if order can be maintained or if

civil unrest and violence occurs and escalates. Reicher *et al.* (2004, 2007) identified the following strategic principles: knowledge and information, facilitation, communication, and differentiation. By applying these principles, the police can help to create conditions for self-policing, where individuals themselves take responsibility for keeping order within a group.

Another important factor for effective operations is how they are managed. Among the characteristics for operations where special police tactics is used, compared to every day police work, is that they are temporary organizations created for the duration of an event. This puts great demands on the competency of commanders to influence a system of persons and techniques. Important command principles identified were, among others, the ability of the command to communicate and organize in a systematic way with roles, responsibilities and resources clarified for each level; coherence between the analysis of the complexity of the event, possible developments of events and the command structure; support of the strategic command level to the operational level; the quality of the preparatory work; flexibility to adjust the actions to changed situations and a lot of responsibility for lower level commanders within the assignment given them (Nylén, 2006).

### Field studies

In the course of the project, 19 field studies were carried out where police operations were observed in real time and a total 571 field interviews were carried out (321 police officers at all levels of the operations, 78 demonstrators or supporters and 172 persons from the general public. The three field studies in 2007 focused on verbal and non-verbal communication between demonstrators and the police and within the police. A semi structured observation method was used. Based on the lessons learned with these field studies, the methodology used in the 2008 and 2009 field studies was changed to the peer review method (Adang and Brown, 2008). This method meant that commanders in

the national reinforcement organization from the three largest police authorities, Stockholm, Skåne (containing the city of Malmö) and Västra Götaland (containing the city of Gothenburg), assisted by the project group, made observations and conducted interviews in real time during operations. Participants received a 2-day training in the field study methodology. A total of 61 persons participated in the field studies of which 34 were police officers, 15 police students 6 researchers and 5 research assistants. Eleven demonstrations/public gatherings and five football matches were observed in this way. During 2008 and 2009 the field study focus was on *the interaction between the demonstrators and the police* and during 2009 (as a result of the field study results of the previous year) also on *the management of the operations*. During the field studies observations and interviews were carried out according to questions that had been decided in advance. According to the utilization focused nature of this approach (Patton, 1997), the strategic commander could also indicate which specific questions he would like to be addressed.

For each field study a field study group was composed, consisting of six to eight participants. On one occasion, an international group, headed by the author, was asked to perform a peer review field study of a football match. The field studies were planned well in advance before the demonstrations and football matches concerned. Before each field study a project group member was responsible for preparation work and was present at the preparatory meetings in the police authority before the operation. The day before the event the observers met in order to plan the field study in detail according to a predetermined structure. The operation's planning and command documents were studied. On day two the field study took place. Observers collected data, working in pairs to make observations and conducting field interviews. Other members from the field study group followed the staff work during the operation. During the field studies all participants had to adhere to two principles. Neither observations

nor the interviews should disturb the event or the police operation and the safety of the observers always had priority. On day three the field study group discussed and compiled their observations. The discussion followed a fixed structure, which also was used for the reports. Discussions always included identification of good practice.

Apart from the field study reports, a handbook on the peer review methodology, a knowledge overview of political extremist groups and a report on dialogue police work has been produced (Holgersson, 2010).

### Exchange of knowledge and experiences

In the course of the project, a total of seven seminars (with a total of over 200 participants) were organized to discuss and learn from the results of the field studies. The participants consisted of members of the national reinforcement organization, the field study groups and SPT trainers. Two seminars were devoted to specific topics: one on the right-left wing protest groups and one on cooperation between different actors related to high-risk football matches. In addition, two international seminars were organized with police officers, researchers and trainers from different countries. Policing public order was discussed between 135 participants from the police organizations from the Nordic countries in 2007. The second international seminar in 2008 was on 'Dialogue and communication as a preventive tool at major events'. Thirty participants discussed the similarities and differences in how dialogue was organized and applied in different countries. A final seminar was carried out in February 2010 with 40 participants in order to discuss the project results and identify what had been learnt.

### Training

The linking of research to SPT courses was carried out in different ways. The author participated in the SPT command training. Other researchers participated in tutor training. Project group members

participated in the development of commander courses that started from December 2008. Field study members participated as tutors in different courses. Their contributions consisted both of discussions on the field study results and on the command process. The competency profiles were used in the planning process of the courses. A cooperation between project group members, SPT tutors and officers responsible for the special tactics training in the three biggest police authorities, the Police Academy and the National Police Board updated the training material (originally written in 2005) to include the latest developments.

### Impressions from the field studies

The field studies in 2007 showed that it was the dialogue police officers who communicated verbally with the demonstrators, whereas uniformed officers mainly communicated non-verbally through their body language, tactical methods, equipment, formation, and vehicles.

The overall analysis of the 2008 field studies showed that the conflict reducing principles were mentioned on paper in the steering documents for the operations and were applied more often than before in practice, but with much variation dependent on who was in command. The uniformed officers said they felt comfortable with the mobile concept and the understanding of the dialogue police function seemed to be growing. Good examples were observed of the interaction between the dialogue police and the organizers of demonstrations and between supporter police and football fans. The area where development needs were greatest was the command process of the operations, such as assignment tactics and contingencies planning. New forms of briefings and follow-up meetings began to emerge. Those interviewed during the field studies among the public, protesters, and supporters also said that the police had developed their approaches to crowds in a positive way.

During the 2009 field studies the development was more visible: there was more information given at briefings about the different groups in the event. Commanders at all levels used the conflict reducing principles to a much larger extent. During the events uniformed police communicated to a larger extent than before with demonstrators, fans, and the public. There was a clear development towards more facilitation of protestors. With regard to differentiation both developments and difficulties were noticed and sometimes it was difficult to know if differentiation was based on factual behaviour or on the belief of officers of what group persons belonged to. During many of the demonstrations different groups took responsibility for keeping the order themselves according to agreements with the police.

An example would be the 'Stop the Match' demonstration held by between 5 and 7000 demonstrators in Malmö on 7 March 2009, where there was considered to be a significant risk of violence. The operation consisted of 901 policemen, including officers from Stockholm and Västra Götaland. The overall order specified the importance of facilitation, differentiation, and communication to create conditions for self-policing. Most officers interviewed were aware of these strategic principles. In previous contacts between organizers and dialogue police officers it was agreed that the organizer would deploy 100 stewards/guards. The demonstration from the city centre to the tennis hall was accompanied by recognizable dialogue police officers, but no other uniformed police officers.

During the demonstration (which included a contingent of masked 'black block' activists) the organizer had 100 own guards who, from the start, tried to keep order in the march and to get the black block to unmask themselves. In front of the tennis hall a group of left-autonomous broke up paving stones and threw them at the police vehicles protecting the entry to the hall. Police only intervened after organizers and stewards had unsuccessfully tried to calm things down, and only against

those committing acts of violence, without disturbing the rest of the demonstration and the speeches that were being held.

The field studies in 2008 clearly showed that the command process, assignments tactics, coordination of information, criminal intelligence, and dynamic risk assessment needed to be developed. In 2009, the impact of the command training for the tactical and group commanders was noted by the field study groups as well as by commanders themselves and their superiors. The field studies did show that there were still differences between the different county police authorities in how the planning process was carried out and between the work in the chain of command. Field study participants also concluded that a more systematic preparation work needed to be carried out with participation of all command levels e.g. by using scenarios, discussions of possible developments of events and agreements on how these can be managed. The number of police officers in an operation needed to be better adjusted to the actual risk level. Experiences from earlier operations could also be used more systematically.

The field studies also showed that a clarification of terms and concepts was called for. The concepts of offensive and defensive strategy (in use since 2004), are connected to war environments and to work against enemies. They are not dynamic, which is needed when working with crowds. The main task for the police in this work, to maintain the basic human rights and to investigate crimes, needs to be clarified to a higher degree in connection with major events.

Graded police work also needs to be developed. This means that deployment resources and use is better adjusted to risk- and threat assessments. What kind of message the police want to signal in an operation is an important ground for graded police work. Responsibilities of the different management levels of the operational organization also need to be clarified to improve the interaction and communication in the chain of command.

## Project evaluation

At the concluding workshop with members from the steering committee, reference-, project- and field-study groups the project goals were regarded to be achieved and the project work was judged to have contributed to learning and developments of applying special police tactics and the management of the operations. The fact that the British inspectorate (HMIC, 2009, p. 43) concluded that 'Sweden has to date most fully developed the model of negotiated management to policing protest (evidenced in the planning and delivery of policing operations)' independently corroborates this evaluation. Knowledge about the factors that contribute to effective police operations was increased, practical and theoretical knowledge was integrated; research results were used in police training; differences between different county police authorities with regard to public order policing had clearly diminished. In addition, a bigger openness among police officers to take in results from research and evaluation had developed. This process of change was facilitated by the broad consensus that existed following the traumatic events of Gothenburg 2001 and the hard and clear conclusions of the Gothenburg Committee. The SPT project was carried out under the responsibility of the National Police Board: before the start, the chiefs of police of the 21 county police authorities formally agreed with the project. There was no consultation or involvement of local authorities: these have little say over police matters in Sweden. The influential police union was also supportive of the project and concluded that it 'showed an exceptionally well-executed change management with great participation from employees and managers' (Polisförbundet, 2012, p. 53, translation by the author). In the course of the project, in the absence of large-scale disorder, there was little attention for police tactics in the media. When the media did mention police tactics (e.g. following an incident

in Malmö on 6 October 2008)<sup>4</sup> this was always done with a reference to Gothenburg 2001 and how that was different.

The evaluation identified several other critical success factors and also some challenges for successful reform.

When special police tactics was first introduced it was focusing on methods, whereas now a theoretical base is available and principles for operations are more accessible. This shared theoretical base and the principles have facilitated and increased the cooperation between the three biggest police authorities as well as between the national reinforcement organization and usual operative work in the other county police authorities. The different training courses within special police tactics are now built to a larger degree on research based knowledge. Research has also contributed with a practically oriented evaluation method in the form of peer reviews. The project methodology has contributed to a developmental climate in the special police tactics organization. The project work has also led to that the foundation for public order policing with crowds, to contribute to upholding constitutional rights of assembly and freedom of speech, has been reinforced (which was acknowledged by members of the public interviewed in the course of the project).

The project was therefore regarded as being of great importance for the development of special police tactics. A great openness had developed and encouraged taking part in this workshop although critical reflections had emerged in the field studies. Theories had been added, competency profiles had been developed as well as the understanding of the connection between the different functions in the operational organization and part of the special police tactics. The great breakthrough for the theories and the principles came with the training of the group commanders in 2009. Some participants put forward that they wished there would have been bigger focus on the theories and

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.sydsvenskan.se/sverige/polisens-taktik-forfinas/> (Police tactics refined).

principles from the start and that lower level commanders had been included at an earlier stage in the process. Also, at the end of the project, dog units, horse units and the criminal intelligence service still lacked training in the special police tactics.

The main success factors identified were the following:

- the field studies that stimulated identification of good practice, reflection and exchange of experiences in a safe learning environment,
- the fact that all project activities included practitioners, trainers, and researchers,
- the fact that project activities included practitioners from different hierarchical levels and different county police authorities.

In the course of the project there were difficulties and problems to be resolved. These were mainly connected to the field study work and were related to attitudes to evaluation and police officers' role as observers.

### Attitudes towards evaluation

One initial difficulty was that there was no experience of evaluating police operations. It was unclear in how far field studies were not some sort of inspections, performed for reasons of accountability mainly. There were worries and a fear to be criticized or that individual officers would be singled out. The fact that the field study group members attended briefings and (after a while) were given space to present how the field studies would be carried out, and the fact that workshops and seminars took place where the results were discussed in an open and non-judgemental atmosphere changed this attitude. The fact that the participants in the field studies were themselves commanders with functions in the national reinforcement organization contributed as well to this change. Another contributing reason was the fact that the reports entailed both examples of good practice and of development needs.

For the observers it was a learning process to develop the ability to see the whole operation, make analyses from a more theoretical points of view and to critically reflect on what had been observed. As confidence in the project increased and feedback was sought more eagerly, it became much easier to provide critical but constructive feedback.

### Cooperation between practitioners and researchers

The overall idea in the project was that researchers, practitioners, and trainers would work together so that perspective and knowledge from the different fields would enrich one another. During the first field studies in 2007 the project group identified that legal requirements of police officers to report crimes could come in conflict with their role as non-intervening observer during the field studies. This led to intensive discussions and comparison with research within other professional fields. The conclusion was that formally this duty for police officers could not be waived and that police officers acting as observers should avoid coming into a situation where this could become an issue. During the field studies that followed, there were no incidents where this became an actual issue. However, the external Swedish researchers involved in the project felt that this reporting duty was in conflict with their research ethics, and they did not participate in the field studies in the final part of the project. This is clearly a topic that requires further attention.

### Conclusion: a recipe for reform?

Three years is a short period to achieve a radical change. No matter the positive results identified by the stakeholders so far, if the developed knowledge is not secured, developed further and deepened the achieved results will disappear in the end. The strategy for long-term knowledge development should continue to be used and areas for development remain. These include continuation

of use of the peer review methodology and the use of seminars and workshops where field study results can be shared and relevant societal and scientific developments (nationally and internationally) can be discussed. It is also of central importance to further develop the knowledge of football fans, demonstrators, and protest movements. Without this knowledge it is difficult to reach an effective strategy which avoids conflicts and respects human rights. The conflict reducing principles which have proven to be effective to prevent and de-escalate conflict could also be used as a basis for other conflictuous police work, for instance with problems in suburbs or with youth gangs. The methodology to develop competency profiles could also be used for other police functions.

In how far can the results of the Swedish SPT project be generalized? One of the strengths of the project has been the relationship between practice, research and training, and the fruitful exchange that has developed. Police reform is known to be difficult, as is linking the world of police practitioners and police (or other) scientists (e.g. Geller, 1997; Adang, 2009). This was also true in this project, although most difficulties were overcome in one way or another. The strategy for knowledge development used to overcome these difficulties could also be relevant in areas other than public order policing. Based on the results of the SPT project and the critical success factors identified, it could be hypothesized that the following elements should be part of a domain independent effective knowledge development strategy and program of change:

- a utilization focused approach (Patton, 1997) with involvement of all relevant stakeholders,
- a consistent combination of/confrontation between practical knowledge (expertise) and theoretical knowledge and concepts,
- a consistent incorporation of available knowledge into police education (both basic education and further education) and the involvement of police researchers in the development of curricula,

- research based on practically relevant questions to enhance knowledge,
- comparative field studies focusing on good practices with involvement of practitioners, police teachers, and police students,
- explicit attention to dissemination of knowledge and actual use of knowledge at all stages of the change process.

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