



Summary:

From Evidence to Proof – the Forensic Organisation of the Swedish Police

Forensics means for example that evidence of crimes is collected on places and persons and analysed to secure technical evidence that can be used to link a suspected perpetrator to a crime, or to eliminate criminal suspicion. The field of forensics has developed rapidly in recent decades, new methods have been generated, thus enabling increasingly reliable technical evidence. Consequently, many crimes that could previously not be solved can now be cleared up.

Audit background and purpose

The contribution of forensics to solving crime is particularly important today, since the person-based clearance rate has fallen by 20 per cent in the past decade (2007–2016), from 16.4 to 13.0 per cent. At the same time, the number of reported crimes increased by 16 per cent, from 1.3 to 1.5 million crimes. This coincides with a 14 per cent increase in the number of police employees over the same period, from 25 800 to 29 500 employees. The Swedish National Audit Office decided to perform this audit because an effective forensic organisation can contribute to an increase in the person-based clearance rate.

The purpose of this audit was to examine whether the forensic organisation of the Swedish Police contributes effectively to improving the person-based clearance rate. Specifically, the audit has focused on effectiveness (whether the forensic methods are used effectively) as well as efficiency (whether the forensic organisation uses its resources in an efficient way). The audit refers to the entire criminal investigation process: from the reporting of a crime, to the submission of the criminal investigation to the prosecutor for assessment of whether prosecution proceedings can be initiated. This means that both the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prosecution Authority are included as auditees.

Audit findings

The conclusions of the Swedish National Audit Office

As regards effectiveness, the overall assessment is that the forensic methods are largely used effectively. Both the National Forensic Centre's (NFC) forensic analyses as well as the crime scene investigations carried out by forensic technicians and local crime scene investigators are considered to be of high quality. The main deficiency identified in the report concerns the crime scene investigations carried out by the intervention police.

As regards economy and efficiency, the Swedish NAO notes that the forensic organisation is ineffective. This is mainly due to the NFC's long processing times, which give rise to extensive problems and an inefficient use of resources throughout the entire judicial chain. The long processing times can in turn be explained by two factors. First, the process whereby orders for forensic examinations are placed is ineffective. Second, forensic examinations ordered are not always cancelled when there is no further need for them in the investigation process.

The Swedish NAO has drawn these conclusions based on several pieces of audit evidence. Each of them clearly points in the same direction: that there are serious obstacles preventing the forensic operations from efficiently contributing to improving the person-based clearance rate for crime.

The NFC's investigations are considered to be of high quality, but processing times are too long

The audit shows that the forensic investigations and customer service are considered to be of high quality. However, there are some deficiencies. The NFC's analysis reports and expert statements are perceived to be difficult to understand by some of the end users in inquiries and prosecutions. Furthermore, the NFC does not always notify the customer if a forensic examination ordered has been restricted. The latter may create problems for the investigation, particularly as regards serious crimes.

As regards effectiveness, the audit shows that the NFC's long processing times contribute to an inefficient use of resources throughout the entire judicial chain. This applies in particular to fingerprint identification, weapons examinations and examinations of bodily fluids and other biological materials. Currently, the long waiting periods lead to some customers sometimes refraining from placing orders for forensic analysis. The

audit indicates three contributory factors in this regard: the process whereby orders for forensic examinations are placed with the NFC is ineffective; some of NFC's forensic officers carry out administrative duties that could be done by administrative staff; and the fact that the NFC has a relatively high staff turnover.

There are ordering deficiencies in the forensic process

The process whereby orders for forensic examinations are placed is ineffective in several ways. This has a negative impact on the efficiency of field operations as well as laboratory operations and investigation operations. The order form itself is perceived to be complicated, and it is reportedly difficult to know how to order the correct analysis. Consequently, orders often contain mistakes, which take time for both customers and providers to correct. The NFC's forensic scientists also state that the customers sometimes want both "belts and braces", in other words order more analyses than are really needed to enable a prosecution to be approved by a court.

The Swedish NAO also notes that the NFC has far too great a case inflow, since the police regions do not to a sufficient extent examine and sort the material to be sent for forensic examination. Moreover, neither the Police Authority's nor the Swedish Prosecution Authority's case management systems record whether any forensic examinations have been ordered that need to be cancelled when a case is discontinued. The consequence of this is that forensic examinations that are no longer needed are not always cancelled, which in turn means that some examinations are carried out but never used.

The deficiencies in the ordering process also impact to some extent on how effectively the forensic methods are used. The customers' knowledge of which forensic examinations are reasonable to perform is inadequate, and both prosecutors and police employees argue that they would need more training in order to know which examinations they can request from the NFC.

Deficiencies in case management systems decrease both efficiency and effectiveness

The audit shows that deficiencies in the case management systems give rise to an inefficient use of staff time throughout the forensic organisation. For the most part, the four systems used do not communicate with each other, meaning that staff must transfer data manually between the different systems. This leads to extensive extra work and increases the risk of incorrect entries, which in turn take time to rectify.

Field operations are considered to be of high overall quality, but there are deficiencies

The audit shows that the forensic methods are by and large used effectively in the forensic field operations. The work carried out by forensic technicians and local crime scene investigators is considered to be of high quality. The Swedish NAO's specific audit of cases concerning burglary also shows that the police to carry out crime scene investigations in these cases to a great extent. The most serious deficiency in terms of the effectiveness of the forensic methods used in the field regard the crime scene investigations carried out by the intervention police. These police officers do not have any forensic specialist qualifications. The audit shows that their crime scene investigations are often deficient, which can mainly be explained by deficiencies in their forensic equipment and skills.

As regards the use of resources in field operations, it is relatively inefficient because the field personnel are obliged to devote far too much of their working time to reporting and placing orders for forensic examinations in case management systems with major shortcomings (see above).

Improved IT support may increase the number of buccal swabs for registration purposes

The forensic method of buccal swabs for registration purposes is used relatively effectively today, but there is potential for increasing the number of buccal swabs. The audit shows that in the cases where buccal swabs are not taken, this is mainly due to three things: lack of reminders in the case management systems of the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prosecution Authority; lack of feedback to the person who carried out the buccal swab of a suspect when the swab gets a hit in a DNA register; and lastly, the fact that the responsibility for taking the initiative to carry out a swab in practice falls between two stools, both within the Swedish Police Authority and between the Swedish Prosecution Authority and the Swedish Police Authority.

Confidence gap between the NFC and the police regions' forensic operations

The Swedish NAO's audit shows that a gap has arisen concerning how forensic operations should be managed. On the one hand, there is a view that all forensic operations should be under the NFC. On the other hand, there is a view that forensic field

operations should be close to investigation operations, and that criminal investigations would suffer if the police leadership did not exert control over the resources. The Swedish NAO does not take any position on the issue of where the functional responsibility for forensic operations should lie, but notes that it is crucial that the gap between the NFC and the police regions is bridged. Otherwise there is a risk that this gap will widen and become permanent, which would not benefit the forensic operations.

The Swedish NAO's recommendations

The Swedish NAO recommends that the Police Authority

- reviews its case management systems as part of the Authority's IT plan
- reviews both the professional development and the equipment of intervention staff as regards the securing of evidence
- reviews the procedures for placing orders for forensic examinations, and takes measures to restrict the number of examinations sent to the NFC to what is relevant
- considers introducing procedures whereby the NFC notifies customers who have placed orders for forensic examinations in relation to serious crime cases if the NFC restricts that examination (to ensure that the restriction does not harm the investigation)
- develops the design of the NFC's analysis reports and expert statements so that they can easily be understood by people without forensic expertise
- establishes procedures to ensure that staff initiate buccal swabs of suspects when the legal prerequisites to do so are fulfilled, and that staff carrying out buccal swabs are notified if there is a hit in the DNA register for a buccal swab that has been carried out.

The Swedish NAO also recommends that the Swedish Prosecution Authority

- introduces a mechanism in the Cåbra case management system to remind the officer in charge of the preliminary investigation to verify before closing a prosecution case whether any orders placed for forensic examinations are outstanding.