Institute for Futures Studies

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From Nordic Exceptionalism to Swedish Populism[2]

Abstract: The text examines Sweden's shift from Nordic penal exceptionalism—characterized by restrained imprisonment, short sentences, legal safeguards and rehabilitation—towards a markedly more repressive criminal policy. Since the mid-2010s, penalties and coercive powers have expanded, while rules concerning young offenders, repeat offending, conditional release and deportation have become stricter et al. The prison population is consequently projected to increase dramatically.

This transformation cannot primarily be explained by a general rise in crime. Sweden has experienced highly visible firearm violence linked to criminal networks, but lethal violence remains below its early-1990s level, while several forms of violence, acquisitive crime and youth offending have declined. Penal reforms have nevertheless continued after shootings began to decrease.

The principal explanation is political. The rise of the Sweden Democrats, their linkage of immigration with crime, and other parties' reluctance to challenge punitive public opinion have driven the process. The development resembles US mass incarceration, where sentencing severity continued despite falling crime and was eventually constrained by its costs. Sweden may face major fiscal burdens, weakened families and communities, widening inequality, and declining trust in legal and democratic institutions. Whether costs will reverse this trajectory—and whether Sweden will return to Nordic exceptionalism—remains uncertain.

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Introduction

All social scientists are aware of the difficulties involved in predicting future societal developments. Prediction is relatively straightforward as long as tomorrow can be understood as a simple extrapolation of trends observed in recent years. Paradigm shifts, however, are far more difficult to anticipate. A further challenge lies in recognizing and responding in a timely manner to a paradigm shift that is unfolding before our eyes. I suspect that many people in Sweden remain unaware of the scale of the transformation currently taking place in Swedish criminal justice policy and of its broader implications for Swedish society.

Throughout the period encompassed by the living memory of present generations, Swedish criminal justice policy has reflected what has come to be known as Nordic exceptionalism. Its principal features have included:

- restrained use of imprisonment
- relatively short sentences
- extensive use of non-custodial sanctions
- a high degree of legal certainty
- comparatively good prison conditions; and
- a strong emphasis on rehabilitation (Pratt, 2008; Lappi-Seppälä, 2007, 2012; Pratt & Eriksson, 2013; Tonry, 2007).

Nordic penal exceptionalism is closely associated with the Nordic welfare model, including its social welfare and healthcare systems. This model is characterised by:

- extensive public responsibility for essential welfare provision
- welfare systems based on a high degree of universalism
- income security founded on a basic level of protection for all
- a comparatively even distribution of income
- equal opportunities and gender equality; and
- financing through taxation and redistribution (Nordic Health and Welfare Statistics, 2025).

One manifestation of this exceptionalism was a low imprisonment rate. Reliable data on the average number of prisoners in Sweden per 100,000 inhabitants are available from 1835 onwards (von Hofer, 2001). These series show that between 1835 and 1850 the imprisonment rate was approximately 170 per 100,000 inhabitants. It then began to decline rapidly during the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. This development occurred in parallel with the democratisation of the Swedish system of government, a process that culminated in the parliamentary breakthrough of 1917 and the introduction of universal suffrage in 1921 (Hadenius, Nilsson, & Åselius, 2023; Lewin, 1998).

The imprisonment rates of the other Nordic countries have also traditionally been low and broadly comparable with that of Sweden. Finland is a particularly instructive case. After having formed part of Sweden for approximately 650 years, Finland belonged to the Russian Empire from 1809 until 1917. When it became independent in 1917, it differed from the other Nordic countries in both its crime patterns and its

legal traditions. In 1945, following the Finnish Civil War, the Winter War and the Continuation War against the Soviet Union, Finland had approximately 300 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants. During the post-war period, however, successive Finnish governments consciously sought closer political alignment with the other Nordic countries. This ambition also encompassed social and criminal policy. Finland's imprisonment rate declined steadily and, since the 2010s, has been at approximately the same level as those of the other Nordic countries: 50–60 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants (Lappi-Seppälä, 2009).

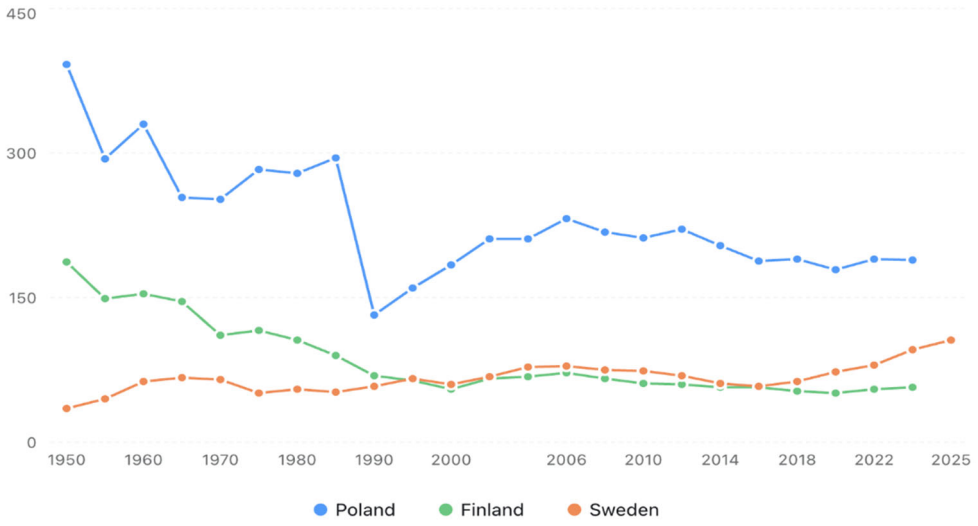


Figure 1. Prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants in Poland, Sweden and Finland, 1950–2025. Source: World Prison Brief (2025).

The Figure 1 clearly shows the deliberate efforts of successive Finnish governments to reduce the prison population and bring Finland into line with Nordic exceptionalism. In Sweden, the imprisonment rate remained relatively stable until approximately 2015, when it began to rise.

Recent reforms of the Swedish criminal justice system

As Figure 1 shows, Sweden's imprisonment rate began to increase during the early 2000s, and the rise accelerated over the past decade. In 2025, Sweden had approximately 100 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants. This development illustrates a paradigm shift in Swedish criminal policy: Sweden is rapidly moving away from Nordic exceptionalism.

The shift in Sweden's penal-policy paradigm can be illustrated by the number of government inquiries proposing legislative changes that increase penalties for various offences and categories of offender, create new criminal offences, or extend the use of coercive measures – in other words, proposals that increase state repression.

A review of Swedish Government Official Reports proposing more repressive legislation over the past 50 years (Figure 2) identified two such inquiries between 1975 and 1989, or one every 7.5 years. Between 1990 and 2010, nine such proposals were presented, approximately one every other year. During the following 15 years, the number rose to 27, almost two per year. The peak occurred in 2023, when five such

inquiries were published. A further two appeared during the first half of 2026, and several inquiries of this kind have yet to present their proposals.

Several inquiries propose harsher legislation for multiple offences. The most extensive, *A Sentencing Reform* (*En straffreform*, SOU 2025:66), recommends increased penalties for approximately 50 different categories of offence.

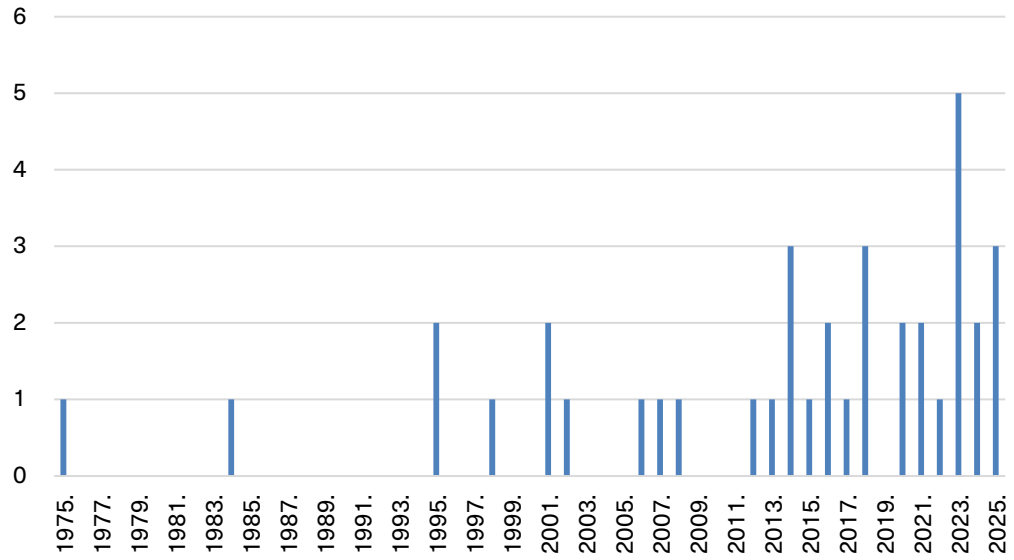


Figure 2. Number of government inquiries proposing increased repression, 1975–2025.

The following are examples of criminal-policy reforms proposed, and in most cases subsequently approved by Parliament, during the past 15 years:

- much broader use of coercive powers.
- lowering the age of criminal responsibility.
- substantial reductions in sentence mitigation for young offenders.
- abolition, or substantial reduction, of sentence reductions for multiple offences.
- expansion of the scope of criminal liability, for example through a broader definition of rape.
- substantial increases in penalties for a wide range of offences.
- further sentence enhancements for repeat offenders.
- criminalisation of membership in criminal gangs.
- stricter rules on conditional release; and
- substantially expanded powers to deport non-citizens convicted of criminal offences
- expanded possibilities for remanding suspected offenders in custody.

The Government has instructed the Swedish Prison and Probation Service to estimate how many additional prison and remand places will be required to implement the adopted reforms. Figure 3 presents the Service's forecast of the average annual number of individuals expected to be held in prisons and remand centres up to 2035 (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2026).

The forecast indicates that the number of prisoners and remand detainees will rise from approximately 5,000 in 2020 to about 18,600 in 2035, an increase of roughly 250 per cent. However, the forecast includes only reforms for which an implementation timetable has been established.

Several reforms already adopted by Parliament, or expected to be adopted in the near future, are not included in the main forecast. Their implementation has been postponed because correctional capacity cannot be expanded at the pace required. The intention nevertheless remains to implement these sentence increases once the necessary capacity is available (see, for example, Government Bills 2025/26:34 and 2025/26:297).

When the Swedish Prison and Probation Service also includes reforms that have not yet been scheduled and extends its assessment beyond 2035, the future number of prison and remand clients is estimated at approximately 36,000. Compared with 2020, this represents an increase of more than 600 per cent (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2026). The latest forecast from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, which extends to the year 2045, indicates that the number of incarcerated individuals could reach 45,000. (Kriminalvårdsmagasinet, October 6, 2026).

Taking projected population growth into account, the number of prisoners and remand detainees per 100,000 inhabitants would rise from approximately 50 in 2020 to about 170 if only the scheduled reforms were implemented, and to approximately 330 if all adopted sentence increases were implemented in 2035 and continue to rise until the year 2045. Which, again taking into account the projected population growth, would mean 405 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants

From a European perspective, this would radically alter Sweden's position, moving it from among the countries with the lowest imprisonment rates to among those with the highest. In 2025, Turkey had Europe's highest reported rate, at approximately 400 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by Belarus at about 345 and Georgia at about 307 (World Prison Brief, 2025). If all the reforms were implemented and imprisonment rates elsewhere in Europe remained constant, Sweden would have, together with Turkey, the highest imprisonment rate in Europe.

Crime trends in Sweden

The preparatory works for the proposed sentencing reforms often refer to the wave of violence that has characterised conflicts within and between criminal networks for more than a decade. At its peak in 2022, shootings killed 62 people and injured 107. In the same year, the police recorded 391 shootings and 90 explosions (Swedish Police Authority, 2026). The number of shootings has since fallen substantially. Explosions also appear to have declined somewhat, although the trend is less clear (Figure 3). This and other indicators suggest that organized crime remains extensive (Mondani & Rostami, 2026), even if it currently appears to be less violent

The past decade's wave of serious violence associated with organised crime is unprecedented in Sweden and exceptional in a European context, although by no means, at least when it comes to shootings, unique in comparison with the United States. Shootings and explosions in public places generated widespread anxiety and extensive media attention. Public concern about crime has increased (NTU, 2026), as has support for harsher penalties (SOM, 2026). Attitudes in Sweden now appear more punitive than those in the other Nordic countries.

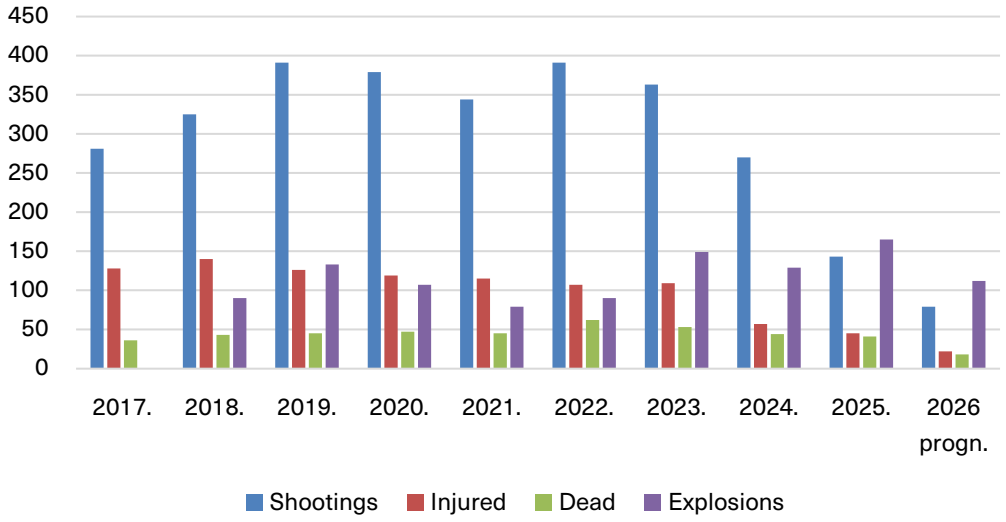


Figure 3. Numbers of shootings, persons injured and killed in shootings, and explosions, 2017–2026. The figures for 2026 are projections based on outcomes during the first eight months of the year. Data on explosions begin in 2018. Source: Swedish Police Authority (2026).

At the same time, the development of crime in Sweden is not unambiguous. Despite the above-mentioned wave of fatal shootings, which may now be subsiding, long-term statistics (Figure 4) show that lethal violence in Sweden is currently at a substantially lower level than, for example, in the early 1990s.

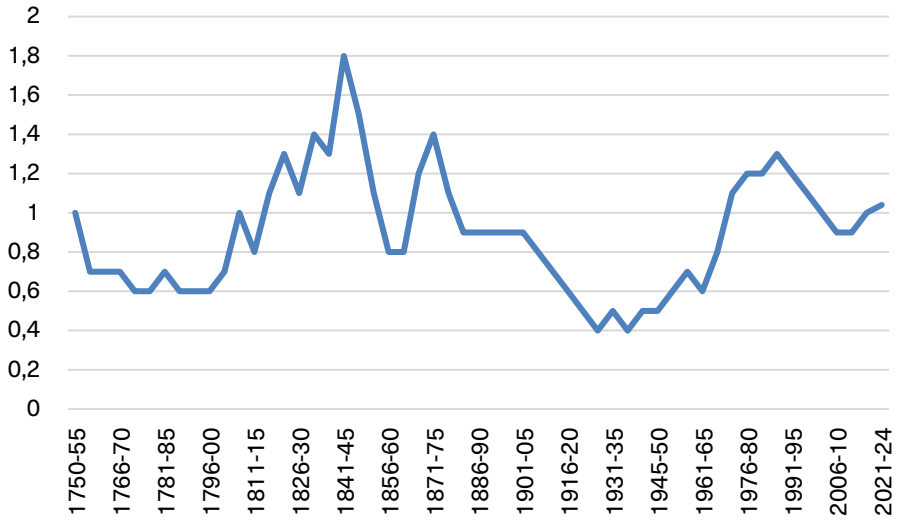


Figure 4. Lethal violence in Sweden per 100,000 inhabitants, five-year averages, 1750-2025 (von Hofer, 2003; Brå, 2026).

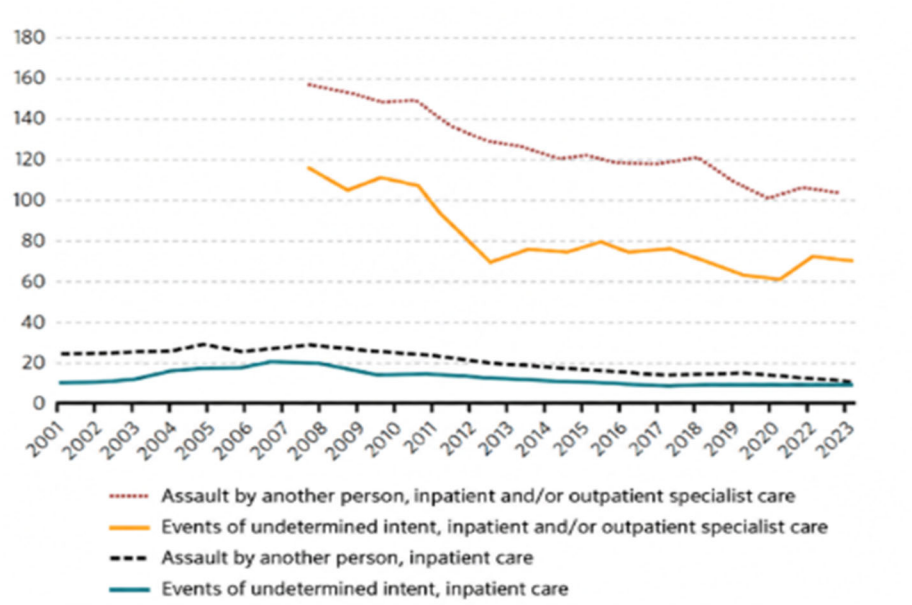


Figure 5. Number of patients treated for assault injuries in inpatient care, 2001–2023, and outpatient care, 2007–2023; and number treated for injuries of undetermined cause (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2026).

An unexpected finding is that while firearm violence has increased in Sweden, the number of people treated for assault-related injuries in both inpatient and outpatient care has declined markedly (Figure 5). To examine whether this reflected changes in classification, injuries of undetermined cause were also reviewed; these likewise displayed a declining trend.

The number of assaults reported to the police has also declined somewhat over the period (Brå, 2026). The same applies to youth violence and youth offending more generally, which appear to have declined with each successive birth cohort (Sivertsson, Nilsson, & Estrada, 2026). These authors note, however, that while offending has declined from one cohort to the next, a small group of persistent offenders has become more criminally active.

There are therefore strong grounds for arguing that, despite the recent increase in violence related to organised crime, Sweden has not experienced a general increase in crime. This is illustrated by the trend in the total number of offences against the Swedish Criminal Code reported to the police per 100,000 inhabitants (Figure 6).

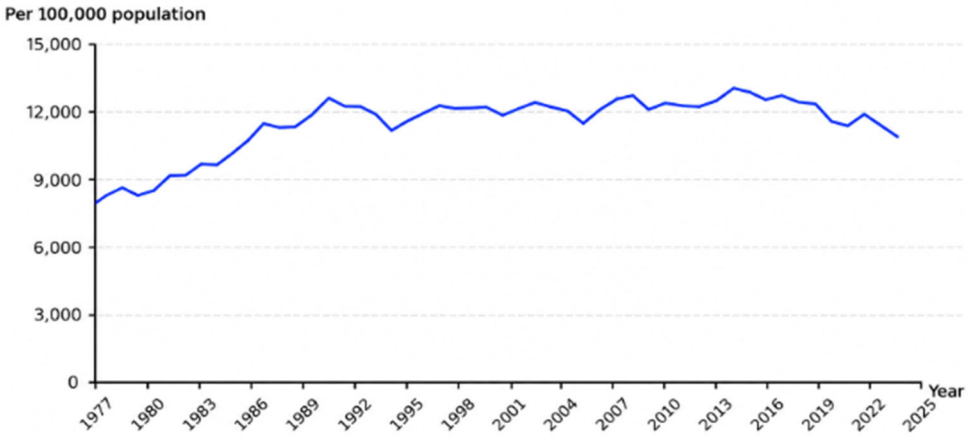


Figure 6. Offences against the Swedish Criminal Code reported to the police per 100,000 inhabitants. Source: Brå (2026).

In summary, Sweden has experienced a wave of serious violence associated with criminal networks over the past decade, but there are signs that this wave is now receding. At the same time, crime has clearly become more organized and more serious among a small group of persistent offenders. Several categories of crime, however, show a declining trend. These include violence generally, acquisitive crime, youth offending and, in particular, youth violence (Rostami & Sarnecki, 2026). Thus, while offending has become more serious among a small group, overall crime has remained stable or declined. The reforms currently being implemented are partly directed at serious violent crime, but they will affect a much broader group of individuals.

Social change and criminal policy

According to Sutherland (Sutherland Cressey and Luckenbill 1992), one of the tasks of criminology is to study the sociology of criminal law: the social conditions that lead criminal laws to be enacted, applied and amended. In the present case, the task is to explain how a stable democracy such as Sweden can suddenly undergo such a dramatic transformation of its criminal policy.

It is not unusual for criminal policy to change when a country experiences major political and social upheaval. This occurred, for example, following the military coups in Chile and Argentina in the 1970s, when prison populations, particularly the number of political prisoners, increased dramatically. The fall of communism in Eastern Europe, e.g. in Poland (Figure 1), at the end of the 1980s provides a contrasting example, having led, at least temporarily, to declining imprisonment rates.

Political change is not always the cause of increased repression. The reverse may also occur: intensified repression intended to combat crime may itself produce political change. El Salvador provides an example. Following another eruption of gang violence in the early 2020s, the president introduced a state of emergency. Measures adopted under the emergency regime included mass arrests without ordinary due-process guarantees; greatly expanded use of pre-trial detention; severe restrictions on the ability of defence lawyers and courts to constrain police action; mass trials in which hundreds of defendants may be tried together; and the construction of the Terrorism Confine-

ment Center (CECOT), a high-security prison in Tecoluca designed to hold approximately 40,000 prisoners. In 2026, El Salvador introduced life imprisonment for offences including murder, rape and terrorism through a constitutional amendment. These reforms have been associated with a pronounced centralisation of power, including a substantial extension of presidential authority (Human Rights Watch, 2026).

According to the World Prison Brief (2025), El Salvador had 1,659 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants. The dramatic transformation of its criminal policy is generally explained by the country's extremely high levels of violence, associated in part with conflict between two large and well-armed gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18. Its comparatively weak democratic institutions are also relevant. Since independence in 1821, El Salvador's history has been marked by weak governments, military dictatorships and civil war (Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004).

Comparison with the United States

Some stable Western democracies have however radically transformed their penal systems without apparently undergoing fundamental changes to their democratic institutions. The most obvious example is the United States. Beginning in the late 1960s, the United States introduced extensive sentencing increases. Its imprisonment rate rose from just over 100 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants in the late 1960s to more than 500 by 2010 (see, for example, National Research Council, 2014).

The causes of the dramatic rise in American punitiveness onwards have been extensively researched (ibid.). At the beginning of the process, it coincided with increases in crime, particularly serious violence. Crime began to decline sharply in the early 1990s, but the process of increasing penalties, and thereby expanding the prison population, continued.

The US prison population peaked in 2009. It subsequently declined, and in 2025 the imprisonment rate stood at approximately 350 per 100,000 inhabitants (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2026).

The factor that finally appears to have halted the continuous increase in sentences and the explosive growth of mass incarceration was its economic cost. In California, for example, the high cost of the prison system and its consequences for the state's finances received considerable attention (Zimring, 2006; Petersilia, 2008; National Research Council, 2014). Recognition of these costs eventually had political consequences in California and other states. A well-known illustration is a 2010 speech by then Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who described as absurd the fact that California was spending 45 per cent more on prisons than on universities (Newsweek, 28 June 2010).

The restructuring of Sweden's penal system is still under way, and it is too early to reach firm conclusions regarding its causes. Although the current Swedish reforms resemble in many respects the developments that began in the United States in the late 1960s, comparisons must be made with considerable caution. Half a century separates the introduction of the respective reforms, and knowledge about effective crime prevention, other than the incapacitation of individuals active in criminal activity, has increased dramatically during that period. The proposition that crime-prevention measures have no effect has been contradicted by a substantial body of research.

Nor should the important institutional differences between Sweden and the United

States be overlooked, including differences in political representation, electoral institutions, prosecutors, courts and opportunities for direct democracy. These structures have major implications for the development of penal policy (Barker, 2017; Zimring, Hawkins, & Kamin, 2001). They complicate direct comparison, but also make it theoretically more informative.

These factors might suggest that a transformation of the criminal justice system as dramatic as that experienced in the United States 50 years ago would be less likely in contemporary Sweden. Nevertheless, such a transformation is taking place. The similarities and differences between the two processes therefore constitute an important scientific challenge.

One significant similarity is that reform began during a period of rising crime in both countries. In the United States, the increase was more general; in Sweden, it concerned a specific but highly visible form of crime – shootings in criminal milieus. In both countries, reforms continued and accelerated after crime began to decline. Once such a process has begun, it is evidently difficult to bring it to an end.

Politics

Most researchers now agree that the dramatic increases in punishment in the United States were driven primarily by political factors. Several political ideas played important roles. One was the War on Drugs, launched by President Nixon in the early 1970s (Nixon, 1971) and escalated under President Ronald Reagan.

Another factor may have been growing scepticism about the treatment and rehabilitation of offenders, which spread in part following research reports questioning the effectiveness of correctional treatment (Martinson, 1974; Lowenthal, 1993).

The view that punishment was the only appropriate response to crime, and that penalties should be severe in order to provide redress to victims, deter crime and incapacitate offenders, enjoyed strong political support and also attracted adherents among scholars (van den Haag, 1975). Significantly, the policy of increasing punishment continued even after one of its basic premises – that crime could not be prevented and treatment did not work – had been shown to be false (Cullen, 2013; Lipsey & Cullen, 2007; Lipsey et al., 2010; Sherman et al., 1998).

Crime, particularly violent and drug-related crime, also increased in Sweden during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Swedish drug policy likewise became more restrictive and punitive. A series of legislative changes increasing penalties began in the early 1970s. Personal drug use was criminalised in 1988, and imprisonment was added to the applicable scale of penalties in 1993 (SOU 2023:62). The latter change allowed the police to employ coercive measures such as urine testing. Police efforts to detect and investigate drug offences, primarily minor offences, increased sharply during the period (Stenström, 2026). For most other categories[3] of offence, however, Sweden continued to follow the Nordic exceptionalist model.

A characteristic feature of Nordic exceptionalism was that criminal policy was not highly politicised or generally subject to party-political conflict (Pratt, 2008). For a long period, this was also true of Sweden. When the centre-right coalition won the 1976

[3] From the 1980s onwards, sentencing reforms have introduced harsher penalties for sexual and violent offences.

election, it appointed an expert without a party-political affiliation, Supreme Court Justice Sven Romanus, as Minister for Justice. Romanus was a compromise candidate. The Conservative Party – the Moderate Party, had initially proposed Astrid Kristensson, who represented a traditional conservative law-and-order position. Her approach to criminal policy was considered too extreme for Sweden at the time (Hagwall, 1977).

It may be argued that until the early 1980s Swedish criminal policy was regarded primarily as the domain of experts. Even then, however, the conservative Moderate Party, like conservative parties in many other countries, emphasised individual responsibility and the importance of punishment. Left-wing parties such as the Social Democrats, by contrast, tended to emphasise structural causes of crime and viewed prevention and social reform as appropriate responses.

When the nationalist-populist Sweden Democrats (SD) became a significant political force during the 2010s (Figure 7), they advocated a more punitive policy than the Moderate Party and explicitly linked crime to immigration. This political campaign intensified following the large refugee inflow of 2015. As SD's influence grew, the Moderate Party and subsequently the other centre-right parties increasingly aligned their criminal-policy messages with those of SD.

Opinion surveys (Pederby 2020, Novus 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026) indicate that, from the beginning of systematic measurement in the 1990s until the late 2010s, the Moderate Party was consistently regarded as having the most credible criminal justice policy. In subsequent years, respondents have alternately expressed greater confidence in the criminal justice policies of the Moderate Party and the Sweden Democrats. In recent years, the Sweden Democrats appear to have successfully challenged the Moderate Party's traditional position as Sweden's principal "law-and-order party". This development has occurred despite the fact that the office of Minister for Justice has been held by a Moderate Party representative for the past four years.

This is clearly reflected in so-called the Tidö Agreement (2022), which formed the basis of the Government's programme for 2022–2026. In the negotiations that culminated in the Tidö Agreement, the Sweden Democrats (SD) occupied a strong bargaining position. They secured support for substantial parts of their political agenda in exchange for supporting the government without formally joining it. The negotiations suggest that the other parties in the governing coalition accepted significant elements of SD's immigration and criminal justice policies.

To support the claimed association between immigration and crime, reference is made to the fact that immigrants constitute a larger proportion of suspects and convicted offenders than of the general population (Brå, 2025). The overrepresentation is greatest for violent and sexual offences, creating the conditions for a simple and brutal political message: "Immigrants who come to Sweden rape Swedish women and assault Swedish men." Variations of this and similar messages have appeared, more or less explicitly, in Swedish public discourse, not least in digital media.

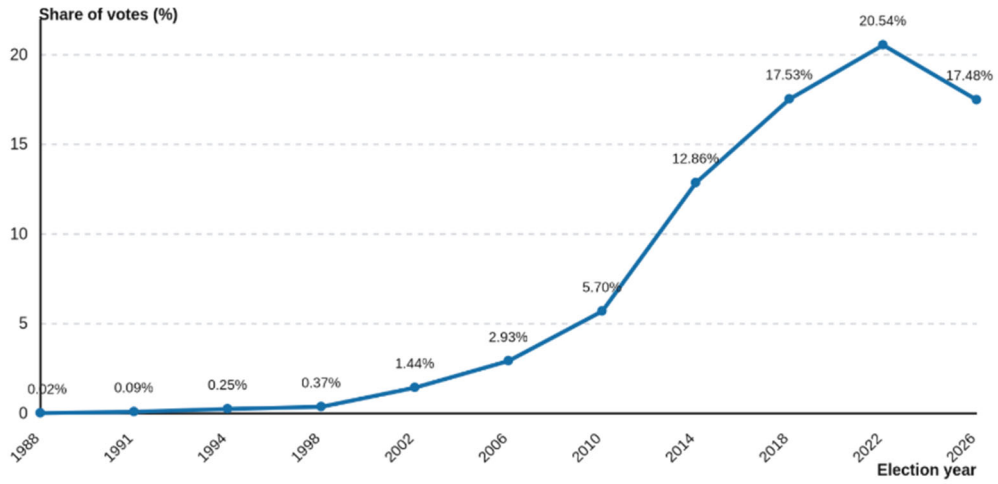


Figure 7. Percentage of voters supporting the Sweden Democrats, 1988–2026. (SCB 2006, Valmyndigheten 2026)

In the 2026 parliamentary election, the Sweden Democrats experienced a decline in electoral support for the first time in the party's history (Figure 7). It seems plausible that this decline was partly attributable to the fact that crime and immigration received less attention during the 2026 election campaign than in 2022. It may therefore be assumed that the party has a political interest in keeping issues of law and order and immigration high on the political agenda.

It should be emphasised that this individual-level association between crime and migration is not found at the macro level: changes in the proportion of immigrants in Swedish society do not covary with crime trends. In the case of lethal violence, for example, the association is instead negative (Sarnecki & Carlsson, 2026). The focus on offending by immigrants, together with reforms extending the deportation of offenders without Swedish citizenship, may have made it easier for the Government to obtain public acceptance of a more punitive policy. Citizens could readily be left with the impression that the reforms would primarily affect immigrants who had committed offences.

Media attention to shootings and explosions, together with what appears to be broad public support for greater punitiveness, seems to have contributed to the Social Democratic Party – Sweden's largest political party – also largely embracing the repressive approach. At present, none of the established political parties appears willing to risk losing support among its electorate by actively opposing more restrictive criminal justice policies. In this respect, too, developments in Sweden resemble those in the United States before the economic consequences of the sentencing reforms became apparent.

Criticism of the reforms in public debate has come primarily from experts. This can be seen in consultation responses to government inquiries, opinions issued by the Council on Legislation, and public interventions by lawyers and social scientists. These groups have also criticised the Government's management of the reform process, particularly the speed with which reforms have been introduced and politicians' lack of interest in expert criticism (DN Debatt, 29 April 2026; Aftonbladet Debatt, 26 May 2026).

Effects of the reforms

It is far too early to draw definitive conclusions about the future course of the Swedish reforms, particularly given that the right-wing coalition appears to have lost the 2026 election. A dramatic change in criminal policy is nevertheless unlikely because the dominant party likely to take office, the Social Democrats, has largely supported the outgoing Government's reforms.

One major issue for those governing Sweden in the coming years will be how to finance the very high costs of the implemented and planned reforms. Unlike in the United States, the entire package in Sweden must be financed by central government, which must simultaneously allocate substantial resources to expanding national defence in accordance with international commitments. As noted above, the entry into force of several reforms has not been determined because of the shortage of prison places. Once large numbers of new prisons have to be constructed, the fiscal consequences will become acute. How the incoming government will address this problem remains uncertain.

It is also too early to assess the reforms' effects. We may nevertheless expect some of the consequences observed in the United States and described, among other sources, in *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States* (National Research Council, 2014).

In addition to the economic consequences of a rapidly expanding prison prisons and population, American research has documented several other adverse effects. Mass incarceration has disrupted families and weakened economically disadvantaged communities, with particularly severe effects among the Black population. Imprisonment often damages future prospects for employment, housing and social participation, while increasing poverty among prisoners' children and other family members.

American scholarship has also examined the effects of mass incarceration on democracy. This includes research on the consequences of disenfranchising people convicted of felonies, a practice found in many states. In Sweden, prisoners retain the right to vote, and no change has so far been proposed. Nevertheless, electoral participation among prisoners, including Swedish citizens, appears to be considerably lower than in the population as a whole (Nilsson, 2002).

Other adverse effects on democratic institutions identified in the American literature could also occur in Sweden. Research shows that population groups frequently brought into contact with the criminal justice system generally exhibit lower levels of trust in that system and in the democratic state (Uggen & Manza, 2002). These effects are not confined to the individuals concerned but also extend to their families (Burch, 2013). Because those affected often belong to ethnic minorities and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, mass punishment can deepen social inequality (Murakawa, 2014).

One important conclusion of this research is that increased repression produces only limited crime-prevention benefits and, in some circumstances, may increase the risk of continued offending (National Research Council, 2014).

Conclusions

The preceding analysis indicates that rising crime is unlikely to be the sole, or even the principal, explanation for the substantial increase in repression in Sweden. Political

change, and above all the growing political influence of the Sweden Democrats, appears to be the most important driver of the transformation in criminal policy. SD has positioned itself as the most punitive party and has successfully established a political association between immigration and crime. If crime trends were the primary cause of changes in Swedish criminal policy, these changes would have occurred at approximately the same time as in the United States. The sharp rise in violence within and between criminal groups from the mid-2010s nevertheless played an important role in legitimising the reforms.

The reforms therefore have political causes and may, over time, themselves produce political consequences by weakening democratic institutions and widening social divisions. Projections of future developments are inevitably uncertain. The trajectory of Swedish penal policy will probably eventually be modified by the unsustainable costs of the reforms. But will this process, as in the United States, take forty years? And will Sweden ever return to Nordic exceptionalism?

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