



A Safer Sweden? A Narrative Analysis of Traveling Crime Stories and the Construction of the Foreign Criminal Other

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Abstract

As vehicles for comprehending the world, narratives play a critical role in shaping popular assumptions about crime and punishment, especially within a changing sociopolitical landscape charged by a moral panic over immigration. This paper analyzes narratives in a collection of 393 documents, titled ‘A Safer Sweden’, published by the Government Offices of Sweden between 2013 and 2021. The collective identities found in this paper highlight ‘who’ crime control measures are targeted at. The three types of intervention narratives, expansion, tough on crime, and border control, open a window into ‘how’ crime control is meant to be carried out. Finally, logic narratives help to understand the ‘why,’ explaining the rationale behind the strategies proposed and implemented in official government publications. Narratives about gang crime restructure the meaning of security and welfare, central to Sweden’s self-image, to make room for exclusionary, expansionist ideas which run contrary to formerly held beliefs about Swedish crime control. These logics also connect themes currently permeating Swedish politics with crime control strategies from other nations, allowing for a better understanding of how stories travel and adapt to new cultural contexts.

Keywords

prisons, crimmigration, narrative criminology, punishment, Sweden, narrative analysis

For decades, the narrative that law-breakers were “orphans of the Swedish people’s home (*styv barn i det Svenska folkhemmet*)” (Pratt, 2008a, p. 130) drove the crafting of Swedish penal policy. This narrative created the belief that law-breakers were still inherently members of Swedish society, whose time in prison was meant for rehabilitation, a necessary step towards being reintegrated into society and restored to full membership in the People’s Home (*folkhemmet*) (Pratt, 2008a, 2022). The orphan narrative led to less punitive attitudes toward law-breakers and created the view that “prison is not for punishment in Sweden. [It is meant to] get people into better shape” (James, 2013). This paper examines how the Swedish government uses narratives to shape the beliefs and assumptions driving penal policy. A robust examination of documents published by the Government Offices of Sweden, in a collection titled ‘A Safer Sweden’, concludes that policymakers promote certain narratives about crime which allow them to propose related policy solutions linked to broader understandings of safety, security, and welfare. Using narrative criminology allows for an analysis of the cultural foundations of Sweden’s drastic shift from inclusive

narratives constructing law-breakers as ‘just like us’ to exclusive punishments targeting the ‘foreign criminal other.’

For most of the 20th century, the non-punitive logic created by the orphan narrative set conditions for policies that emphasized rehabilitation, reduced the level of sanctions, and replaced short sentences with community alternatives to reduce the harmful effects of prison (Lappi-Seppälä, 2007, p. 247). These types of narratives about crimes and offenders are a crucial part of shaping cultural conditions that determine socially acceptable punishments (Kramer, 2020). As prison populations in most of the western world ballooned, Sweden’s remained steadily low, causing researchers to see it as one of the last bastions against law and order politics and penal excess (Lappi-Seppälä, 2019; Pratt, 2022; Pratt et al., 2011).

This logic, with its reductionist and rehabilitative outlook on crime control, is now a thing of the past. After almost a century of center-left dominance in Swedish politics, the far-right influence sweeping the Global North arrived when the Sweden Democrats (SD), a far-right party with roots in neo-Nazi groups, won seats in the Riksdag for the first time in 2010 (Inskeep, 2022; Milne, 2019). Despite the center-left parties remaining in power from 2014 to 2021, the influence of anti-immigrant rhetoric on Swedish politics has led to immigrants and foreigners being blamed for a rise in crime (Boréus, 2021; Heber, 2023; Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019; Widfeldt, 2017; Williams, 2018). This was paired with a so-called migration crisis which caused Sweden to close its border with Denmark in November 2015, after welcoming one of the highest per capita rates of asylum seekers in the European Union the year prior (Barker, 2019, p. 1; Heber, 2023; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018; Pratt, 2022). Since this unprecedented reversal in migration policy, Sweden has expelled, rejected, and deported between 2,000 and 3,000 asylum seekers each year (Barker, 2019, p. 1), while an increasing number of immigrants find themselves in prison or in segregated and over-policed “Nordic style Ghetto areas of main cities” (Pratt, 2022).

While Sweden’s prison population remains one of the smallest in the world, sentencing reforms and policy changes led the Swedish prison population to increase consistently since 2017 (Einerstam, 2018; Kriminalvården, 2020). The Sweden Democrats’ success in the 2022 election forced the right-wing bloc to formally build an alliance with SD, announced under the banner of the Tidö Agreement (Ruderstam et al., 2022). The 63 page document proposes reforms that include doubling sentence lengths, abolishing probation, and lowering the age of criminal responsibility (Regeringskansliet, 2022, November 3; Sweden Democrats et al., 2022). These led to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (Kriminalvården) announcing plans to expand the prison capacity by almost 300%, from 9,000 to 27,000 places, to address the spike expected from the new government’s planned reforms (Kriminalvården, 2023; Schclarek Mulinari, 2024).

Much criminological interest in Swedish prisons seeks to understand why some countries have so *few* prisoners (Christie, 2000) and how penal systems can be so different across the world (Pratt, 2022). John Pratt’s Nordic penal exceptionalism thesis sparked much debate, inspiring multiple books questioning whether Nordic penal systems were an exception to the global trend of penal expansion (Barker, 2013; Eriksson & Pratt, 2014; Pratt, 2008a; 2008b; 2022; Pratt et al., 2011; Ugelvik & Dullum, 2011). In a 2022 paper, responding to critics and revisiting his original analysis, Pratt writes that he originally sought to “explain how it was that formal accounts of punishment differed so much between the two clusters of societies” (Pratt, 2022, p. 113). He argues, “there is no law and order ‘firestorm’ blazing around the world”, citing that the gold standard for rehabilitation, “Halden Prison in Norway would be just as unacceptable in New Zealand as that country’s

shipping container cells would be in Norway” (Pratt, 2022, p. 123). According to Pratt, this proves that Nordic exceptionalism remains (Pratt, 2022).

However, this paper concludes that stories about crime are transferable in ways that material structures may not be. The physically draconian conditions that see prisoners laboring in sweltering Louisiana cotton fields (Benns, 2015) or living in New Zealand’s shipping container cells would almost certainly be unacceptable in Sweden. Yet, the stories that feed the ‘tough on crime’ logic used to justify those conditions in other countries are now being written into Swedish law. This paper illustrates how narratives can be transferable across cultures, speaking directly to how narratives travel and contributing to a future direction that narrative criminology is well placed to explore (Fleetwood, 2019, p. 38).

This paper introduces narrative criminology into the existing discussion on Nordic penal policy, taking a new approach to analyzing “formal accounts of punishment” (Pratt, 2022, p. 113) in policymakers’ own words. The dataset comprises 393 publications from the Government Offices of Sweden in a collection titled ‘A Safer Sweden’ (*Ett Tryggare Sverige*). This specifically curated subsection of government documents published between 2013 and 2021 allows this paper to look at which narratives the government officially used to suggest how safety and security should be understood and achieved. Approaching this data through the lens of narrative analysis uncovers the shifts occurring below the surface prior to changes in material structures. Analyzing the specific ways that the government promoted discussions about crime control and security illuminates how certain narratives set the stage for future expansionist policies. The shifts exposed themselves in three main ways that inspired the research questions structuring this paper:

1. What are the collective identities built through the crime narratives in ‘A Safer Sweden’?
2. Which narratives describe Sweden’s new crime control interventions and the crime problems they’re responding to?
3. Which narratives explain the logic behind Sweden’s new crime control reforms?

The analysis of the ‘A Safer Sweden’ publications revealed two dichotomous collective identities: the gang criminal and the ordinary people. The first part of the results section describes the ways that characters and identities are created through the stories the government tells about crime. Additionally, the examination of crime stories identified three types of intervention narratives: expansion, tough on crime, and border control narratives. These narratives create the suggested relationship between crime problems and crime control solutions which informs the public understanding of causes of crime, often through a racialized lens. Finally, the discussion section analyzes the interplay of individual responsibility and traditional correctionalist narratives to explore the motivations underwriting policy changes. The logic narratives allow for a comparison across countries to understand how components of stories are reworked to advance the same logic and policy goals in different national contexts.

Nordic criminology in context

Two questions posed by Nils Christie, ‘why are there so many prisoners?’ and ‘why are there so few prisoners?’, describe the two theoretical tracks which converge in this paper (Christie, 2000). Garland, Wacquant and many others discuss the punitive turn, describing the myriad ways western nations have expanded their penal systems in the

last half century (Garland, 2002; Green, 2012; Pratt, 2007; Wacquant, 2009, Wacquant, 2016). According to Wacquant, a new crime control ethos developed in the United States was introduced to Europe, creating a ‘new penal common sense’ aimed at universalizing punitive ideas and making them seem self-evident (Wacquant, 1999). In the same way that Black Americans are the “foremost clients” of their country’s prison system, European prisons are on course to create “analogous’ systems where ‘foreigners and quasi-foreigners (second generation immigrants) would be the Blacks of Europe.” (Wacquant, 1999, parenthetical addition my own). This logic is now buoyed by far-right parties with increased influence in governments across Europe and their insistent focus on immigration and crime (Boréus, 2021; Franko Aas, 2011; Franko, 2019; Heber, 2023; Lousley, 2020; Stumpf, 2006; Williams, 2018). The burgeoning field of crimmigration has looked deeply into the policing of movement in Europe through processes of othering and bordering, the securitization of external EU borders, the administrative detention of migrants, and the development of separate prison facilities for foreign nationals (Franko & Gundhus, 2015; Pakes & Holt, 2017; van der Woude, 2020)

Within the context of European penalty, Nordic countries are traditionally known for their commitment to rehabilitation, low incarceration rates, and small prison populations (Pratt, 2022). Proponents of Nordic exceptionalism claim that Nordic nations’ cultures of equality, with shared values of egalitarianism, homogeneity, and social solidarity, serve as the foundation for the countries’ small prison populations (Eriksson & Pratt, 2014; Pratt, 2022). Barker and other critics of exceptionalism use the concept of bifurcation to demonstrate how Nordic penal systems are humane and inclusive for citizens while relying on exclusionary social controls (prison as confinement, migration detention, and deportation) for non-citizens (Cohen, 1972; Bloomberg & Hay, 2013; Barker, 2017; Shammas, 2016).

The bifurcated penal system demonstrates the cyclical relationship between culture and crime control. On one hand, the methods and logic of crime control are shaped by “a set of standards based in values” deeply rooted in culture (Christie, 2000, p. 212212). On the other hand, culture is sustained and reinforced by the violent arm of crime control (Kramer, 2020). While some cultures may promote inclusion internally, Kramer argues that cultures are inherently punitive as they are often built on dichotomies that position desirable attributes in opposition to the other (Kramer, 2020, p. 154). Cultural factors influence the who and how of punishment, ascribing meaning through the “communicative” power of crime control which sends messages about who is undesirable, unwelcome, and unwanted in society (Barker, 2017, p. 450; Zedner, 2015). When penal systems mobilize against the most marginalized in society, those actions cannot be separated from the broader social context they are informed by (Kramer, 2020, p. 155).

Inclusion in Nordic societies is associated with membership in the *folkhemmet* and related guarantees of *trygghet*, defined by Barker as “personal security, economic wellbeing, and a sense of belonging or attachment to society” (Barker, 2019). By moving toward a definition focused on social security instead of economic stability, Barker opens the door to a discussion of who can access the benefits of the welfare state. The theory of welfare nationalism describes how the criminalization of racialized others can be seen as a way of creating a “racial welfare state” preserving the ethno-cultural People’s Home for ethnic Swedes (Barker, 2017; Schclarek Mulinari and Keskinen, 2020, p. 2). Across Europe, crimmigration scholars describe penal institutions at the border as the “gatekeepers of membership”, protecting the boundaries of national identity (Franko Aas, 2013, p. 23; Stumpf, 2006). Bordered penalty highlights the exclusionary function of culture and

the use of punishment for identity production (Franko, 2014; Todd-Kvam, 2019). Thus, punishment serves as a termination of membership in the imagined community defined by conformity to the norms of ordinary people (Franko, 2014, p. 526; Ugelvik, 2012, p. 121).

The terms used to describe criminalized migrants – “liminal criminal migrant”, (Ugelvik, 2012, p. 128) “foreign criminal other” (Todd-Kvam, 2019, p. 304), and “deviant” other (Melossi, 2000, p. 300), are all intentionally broad enough to encompass those who violate immigration law, so-called illegal immigrants, as well as immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees with either citizenship or legal residence. The impact on legally residing migrants demonstrates how the ‘invisible borders’ racialized people embody become a way for the government to penalize, regulate, and exclude undesirable people through racialized *internal* border controls (Khosravi, 2010, p. 99). The deviant other is not only different from ordinary people. Worse, they are marked as threatening and dangerous, changing their representation from alien to monstrosity, a producer of evil far beyond the possibility of empathy (Melossi, 2000, p. 300; Ugelvik, 2012, p. 127).

Studies on neoliberalism, late modernity, and the expansion of penal power in Nordic societies all focus on the increased use of symbolic politics and the use of imprisonment for purposes of exclusion (Barry & Leonardsen, 2012; Hermansson, 2018; 2019b; Hermansson, 2019a; Lappi-Seppälä, 2007; Shammas, 2016; Tham et al., 2011). In the current political discourse, the primary means of addressing *otrygghet*, constructed to mean insecurity or ‘fear of crime’, is the exclusion of the foreign criminal other (Hermansson, 2018; 2019b; Hermansson, 2019a; Sahlin-Lilja, 2018). It is also another way to demonstrate how “state authorities nowadays are preoccupied with the production of (in)security from racially constructed and perceived threats” (Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020, p. 5). In the construction of the crime problem, and specifically the gang crime problem, the foreign criminal other is “mutate[d] into a ‘suitable enemy’ – to use Christie (2000) expression – at once a symbol of and target for all social anxieties” (Wacquant, 2016, p. 219).

Understanding crime policy through narratives

Narrative criminologists traditionally examine stories told by victims or harm-doers as they try to ascribe meaning to the harmful actions they’ve experienced firsthand (Brookman, 2015; Cook, 2019; Copeland, 2019; Tutenges, 2019; Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013; Ugelvik, 2015). However, the stories in ‘A Safer Sweden’ do not function in the same way as they are not meant to be understood as stories. Presser’s concept of rhetorical restraint focuses on the way that technical stories, such as social theories, tend not to call themselves stories or be understood as such, because narrators avoid dramatic statements and use their social positioning to craft narratives as matters of fact (Presser, 2018, p. 109). Despite their muted rhetoric, theory-stories are able to communicate strong messages about big concerns with small rhetorical moves (Presser, 2018, p. 110). Presser explains:

Often, though not always, theory-stories erase suffering. They generally avoid emotional terms. In criminological theories, the rhetoric is mild, but the drama is high inasmuch as people are bad or becoming so, to our peril. Emotional terms are not used, although the plotline should, logically, stimulate. (Presser, 2018, p. 110)

The concepts of rhetorical restraint and theory-stories are central to this paper's analysis because the 'A Safer Sweden' documents are filled with statements, theories, and retellings of events meant to be understood as matter-of-fact, objective analysis. The ability to recognize muted rhetoric as narrative allows for an identification of the structure and definition of how narratives will be analyzed in this dataset.

This paper uses theories on policy narratives to narrow down what will be considered a narrative in this dataset, building on Boswell et al.'s three-pronged definition:

a set of claims about the policy problem that a policy intervention should address. This will typically involve claims about the nature and scale of the problem, including a delineation of the 'target population' at which interventions are directed.

a set of claims about what causes the problem and to what extent the problem could be controlled... Often, such causal stories imply attributing blame to specific factors or actors

a set of claims about how policy interventions have affected, or are likely to affect, these policy problems. Policy narratives not only construct a specific reality, but also call for action upon this reality. (Boswell et al., 2011, p. 5)

Theory stories often do not contain these three components together. Often, allusions to other stories allow connections to appear (Polletta, 2008). Components of narrative can be identified through simple references alone, usually to the story's protagonists, drawing on well-known stories to invoke powerful narratives so the reader anticipates a specific outcome (Polletta & Callahan, 2017). These references "demonstrate moral claims indirectly by showing not stating, that things turn out well when one acts in a certain way, and not otherwise" (Harold, 2005).

Smith's work on character polarization and binary codes provides a frame for understanding the first component by describing the methods used to exclude target populations. Binary codes are the foundational building blocks of narrative used to create the moral boundaries which allow for collective representations of self and the world (Smith, 2005, p. 15). These culturally structured symbols assign friend or enemy labels and make judgements about who should and should not be included in society (Presser, 2018, p. 123). The construction of moral characters "affirm[s] and fortif[ies] a dichotomy between the civilized citizenry and antisocial other" and works to reify the criminal and noncriminal persons (Presser, 2018, p. 125). On one hand, the story of crime "is an identity vehicle for the good people among us" (Presser, 2018, p. 132) while on the other, it casts away the criminal as antisocial and beyond the scope of our concern "produc[ing] widespread tolerance of penal harm" (Presser, 2018, p. 127). Without concern for the criminal other outside the threat they pose, managing the threat through punitive segregation allows ordinary people to "feel satisfied with the harm being done" (Presser, 2018, p. 129).

Claims about the causes of crime rely on narrative sequencing and causal stories to attribute blame. Stories become a sense-making form used to "allocate causal responsibility" for the crime problems earlier discussed (Smith, 2005, p. 18). Narrative sequencing aligns action with broad, abstract questions and purposes while also priming audiences to expect policy solutions to follow preceding stories (Ricoeur, 1984).

The final component, claims about interventions, gives narratives their motivating power. Boswell et al. stress "the potential for narratives to provide a coherent and compelling account of complex phenomena, in a way that can engender support and motivate

action” (Boswell et al., 2011). Every narrative has a “preferred outcome” (Halverson et al., 2011, p. 21) allowing them to “suggest courses of action, ... and provide social approval by aligning events with normative cultural codes... People make sense of the world with stories and act accordingly” (Smith, 2005, p. 18).

Since crime is socially constructed, acts that can be constructed as criminal are “in endless supply,” and as such there is an endless demand from people willing to pay for what they see as “security” (Christie, 2000, p. 1). This demand for security, communicated through narratives, shapes the “thought patterns and general theories” through which people understand crime control and “clear the way for action” in the penal field (Christie, 2000, p. 26). This paper concludes that narratives *inspire* harmful action (Presser & Sandberg, 2015; Tutenges, 2019) and create the meaning that becomes the “essence of [harmful] action and of crime control” (Presser, 2016, p. 144).

On the important question of causality, this paper uses Butler’s metaphor of the breeding ground, to “point out conditions, not causes” (Butler, 2004, p. 11). As Butler explains, “a ‘breeding ground’ does not necessarily breed, but it can... Conditions do not ‘act’ in the way that individual agents do, but no agent acts without them” (Butler, 2004, p. 11). The conditions, specifically the way that narratives are used to shape understandings of crime, do not directly cause changes to incarceration rates or material structures inside prisons. However, these conditions can and do inspire and give meaning to decisions on penal policy.

Methods

The data used for this research is a collection of publications from the Government Offices of Sweden under the label ‘A Safer Sweden’ (*Ett Tryggare Sverige*). This collection was publicly available¹ on the Government Offices of Sweden website (regeringen.se) where updates about government actions are posted regularly. This dataset does not include all publications from the Ministry of Justice or all changes to the Swedish penal code. Instead, the documents in this collection were specifically chosen by the Government Offices of Sweden to promote ideas about how safety and security should be achieved.

‘A Safer Sweden’ includes several different types of government publications used to debate and craft crime policy. This sample includes 173 press releases, 49 referrals² (to legal councils or other related institutions), 25 bills,³ 24 committee directives,⁴ 20 memorandums,⁵ 19 assignments,⁶ 18 articles, 15 public investigations,⁷ 13 fact sheets, 10 debate articles, and four speeches. In total, the sample was 905 pages and approximately 452,000 words. All documents were published between February 2013 and March 2021. The methodology also included a limited snowball sampling off the dataset where attachments and hyperlinks were selectively chosen for further analysis, when cited reports, initiatives, and events required additional research.

The dataset’s bills, press releases and other publications are not altered once published, providing invaluable historical continuity. The documents represent a snapshot in time that can “open a window into... values, beliefs, preoccupations, and habits of mind that may be shared (or contested) among a given group” (Cashman, 2012, p. 182). Qualitative researchers always risk choosing a skewed sample; however, since the publications in this collection were chosen by Government institutions themselves, the selective inclusion and omission of specific documents becomes another point of analysis. The fact that the Government chooses to only discuss fighting gang crime as a measure to increase security, while excluding crimes such as domestic violence or drunken driving, bears tremendous

significance. These insights make this dataset perfect for understanding how criminal justice institutions represent security and the characters which threaten and protect it.

The documents were coded by highlighting key themes and noting their frequency. These themes were then grouped together under one of the three components of narratives. The insights gained from where in the historical timeline narratives appeared are limited, likely due to the Government's selective omission and inclusion of documents in this collection. There are only eight documents in the collection published prior to the 2015 border closing and no significant shift in narratives and rhetoric noticeable around this historical inflection point. However, documents coded for 'border' themes were disproportionately high from 2015 to 2017. Below, narratives are discussed in order of frequency.

Results

This section is broken into two parts according to Boswell's components of policy narrative. The first part discussed the two actors most present in the narratives, gang criminals and ordinary people. The second section will discuss the claims about specific types of crime control interventions and the crime problems that precede them. The interplay of these components, along with allusions to the causes of crime, work together to build the three types of intervention narratives found in the dataset: expansion, tough on crime, and border control narratives.

Gang criminals

The expansion of the Swedish penal state relies on the narrative of police and prisons fighting against the easily identified enemy character of the gang criminal (*gångkriminella*). The constructed gang criminal is the theme most present in this dataset, appearing in 128 of 393 documents, twice as often as any other code. In statements such as "organized crime is a serious threat to democratic society" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2016c) and "we can show that society is stronger than gangs" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021b), the gang members are constructed as the foreign criminal other, rather than 'orphaned children' meant to be 'just like us.' Discussion of gang crime is notorious for its coded language and muted racial inferences (Wang, 2018). In Sweden, the gang criminal is typically imagined as a dark-skinned, Muslim immigrant from either the Middle East or Africa. This stereotype is reified through emphasis on policing border areas and so-called vulnerable communities (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020c).

Framing gang criminals through strong character polarization serves two purposes for crime control institutions. First, the character polarization allows gangs to be constructed as a strong enemy with "system-threatening elements" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2016c), creating the trajectory and narrative consequence Smith describes (Smith, 2005). Furthermore, by constructing gang criminals as either foreigners or outside antagonists working against society, a harsher, less comfortable form of punishment for this group becomes acceptable. Both the allusions to combat and more austere punishments are present in statements such as, "an exceptional offensive is being carried out, Operation Rimfrost, with the aim of reducing violence, seizing weapons and drugs and putting gang criminals behind bars" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019e). This type of language, using military terms and punitive phrases, clears the way for the reader to see gang members as the enemy and creates "social approval" (Smith, 2005, p. 18) for the increased punitive action taken against them.

Traditionally, juveniles are understood as a vulnerable group subject to a different, and often more lenient, set of judicial rules. However, in 'A Safer Sweden' the juvenile is lumped in with the gang criminal. The delinquent is institutionally produced (Foucault, 1995, p. 301), reconstructing the representation of youth from a vulnerable person in need of protection to a threat to adults (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021b). This changes the framing of young people who commit crimes from wayward Swedish children in need of care and guidance to dangerous gang members in training, justifying the idea that young people need stricter, more harmful forms of punishment. A new penalty, youth monitoring (*ungdomsövervakning*) was created, meant to be "significantly intrusive with regard to the seriousness of the crime and the young person's previous criminality" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2017, June 20) and provide a "clear reaction from society that helps them stop committing crime" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2016c). Additionally, the policy rebate which reduced the sentence length of people aged 18 to 20 was abolished (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020e). The publications' descriptions of the "limited group of young people who commit those crimes" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020d) include deeply racialized and class-based references which construct threatening urban young people⁸ through allusions to immigrants and Muslims living in vulnerable, at-risk areas where honor related issues are present (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020a). By describing young people's involvement in crime with "signifiers of blackness [as well as immigrants and Muslims in the Swedish case] that draw on highly sensationalized images of street gangs, inner city violence, and so forth... rather than being seen as vulnerable, the (racialized) juvenile [is] constructed as a *predator*' (Wang, 2018, p. 196, 204).

Ordinary people and society

Ordinary people function as the binary opposite juxtaposed against the gang criminal as the antisocial other. The character is often evoked in rise in crime narratives, emphasizing the negative impact on collective feelings of safety with statements like "this affects honest people so we cannot have it" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019c) and "ordinary people suffer" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019a).

Narratives about society draw a new boundary around the imagined community (Anderson, 1998) which leaves people convicted of crimes on the outside looking in, a noteworthy difference from the intentional inclusion of incarcerated people in the "orphaned child" narrative (Pratt, 2008a). One of the main constructions of 'society' is as a protagonist who must respond to crime to strengthen and protect the nation. Narratives suggest that "society must react" to crimes (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019d) by looking at ways to "sharpen society's reaction" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018) to certain crimes and stating that "society must look extremely strictly at such crimes" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019b).

In many narratives discussing the execution of tangible crime control responsibilities, the word "society" is used in place of the names of specific crime control institutions. Publications discuss "sharpening society's tools against crime" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021a) and increasing "society's ability to handle [explosive goods]" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019h). Rather than using the names of specific institutions such as the police, the courts, or even "the government" as a general term, these documents discuss "society's work to reduce crime and increase security" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019i).

Making society, rather than criminal justice institutions, the protagonist in crime control reinforces the villainizing construction of the foreign criminal other. Narratives

calling for “the whole society [to stand] up” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019g) and “contribute to the fight against crime” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021e) are meant to inspire actions and shape popular beliefs about appropriate crime control responses. These narratives function to build collective identity among non-criminal ordinary people while simultaneously constructing the work of criminal justice institutions as a responsibility of “society”, in a way that assumes the “good character” of the crime control agent (Presser, 2018, p. 129).

Intervention narratives

This section will directly address two of the three components of Boswell’s policy narrative: claims about policy problems and claims about policy interventions. The third component is not directly discussed in this section or in the dataset, since references to causes of crime are made through allusions and “causal stories [which] imply attributing blame to specific factors or actors” (Boswell et al., 2011, p. 5). The narratives in this section are organized based on the three most used types of proposed interventions: expansion, tough on crime, and border control narratives.

Crime problems

One of the crime problems most often presented is serious crime which the government describes as aggravated assault, aggravated robbery, aggravated extortion, serious unlawful threat, as well as gun crimes and violations of permits for weapons and explosive materials (Government Offices of Sweden, 2016b). The government’s categorization includes only gang-related crimes as ‘serious’ and omits other crimes such as domestic violence or sex crimes. Violent crime also includes several different types of crimes related to gangs. The most referenced types of violent crimes are crimes involving explosive or flammable materials and shootings. Weapons crimes are often connected to smuggling and international organized crime to justify stronger borders and increasing the powers of Customs police. Many of these crimes also involve narratives about vulnerable areas or border areas leading to these communities becoming the target of increased surveillance. Violence is often described as taking place “in criminal environments” or between gangs often using the setting of “public places,” to emphasize the danger to ordinary people (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021d).

Expansion narratives

The most common intervention narrative focuses on the “great expansion” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020d) of the Swedish police force as well as the expansion of the budget and scope of prisons, judiciary, and other punitive institutions. Discussions suggest expansion as the sole, unavoidable solution to increase security and reduce crime. Former Deputy Prime Minister Morgan Johansson said:

Increasing security in society is one of the government’s and Social Democrats’ most important priorities... The single most important investment to increase security in Sweden is more police officers on streets and squares, and more police officers who can solve crimes. That is why the government is making the biggest investment ever; by 2024, the police will have 10,000 more employees throughout the country. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019i)

Much remains to be done, but no action is more important than Sweden getting more police officers. Therefore, the Police Authority will continue to grow, get more tools to fight crime and get better working conditions. More police officers is a cornerstone in our community building for a stronger and safer Sweden (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020h).

This growth in the size of the police force is paired with narratives on increasing police power to surveil, search, and seize (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020f, September 30 2020g). This type of narrative uses a simple thought pattern, capitalizing on moral panics and politically constructed crime surges to suggest penal expansion as the natural, unavoidable response.

Tough on crime narratives

‘Tough on crime’ narratives involve discussions of specific types of harsh punishments and punitive ways of speaking about criminals. Narratives about punishment discuss confirmed or proposed penalty increases such as the introduction of longer prison sentences, harsher fines and mandatory sentencing guidelines that either add to minimum penalties, increase the maximum penalty, or increase penalties from a fine to time in prison. These changes are used as a solution for a wide range of problems, including gang crimes, serious crimes, possession of weapons and explosives, violence against Blue Light Personnel, and economic crimes. These increases are often paired with emotionally rousing charged rhetoric:

Right now police are carrying out very offensive operations against gang crime, not least in the Stockholm area. In recent times, as many as a hundred people have been detained here, many of whom are leaders and key people in such networks. All or large parts of criminal gangs have been beaten out in several vulnerable areas and new raids with further arrests in the region take place almost daily.... The police will not back down an inch in their work. On the contrary, they will tirelessly hunt down these criminals day and night, and they have the whole of society behind them. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020h)

The government is moving forward with a comprehensive action program of 34 points to further intensify the fight against gang violence in Sweden. The program is about both tougher penalties, new powerful tools for law enforcement, but also social efforts that stop recruitment to gangs in the long term. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019e)

The trend towards increased gang crime has not happened overnight. It is the result of increased class divisions and reduced equality over decades, but also of the fact that society did not put hard against hard against emerging criminal groups (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020g).

The use of militarized language, such as hunting, fighting, and raiding, is a clear identifier of tough on crime narratives. The use of the Swedish phrase, “*sätta hårt mot hårt*”, literally translated as “put hard against hard” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020g), adapts the widely known “an eye for an eye” narrative for the Swedish context. These types of retributive narratives suggest that the simplest and most standard course of action for addressing crime problems involves “further sharpening of punishments as a means of crime control” (von Hofer & Tham, 2013, p. 49). However, it is important to note

the symbolic mention of social efforts alongside emotionally charged calls for tougher penalties to maintain the Swedish self-image.

Border control narrative

Narratives about strengthening control at Sweden's internal borders discuss making it easier to deport people who have committed crimes (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020b). Discussions of giving police "the ability to control foreigners' right to residence and fight crime in this type of [border] area" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020c) connect crime and insecurity to immigrant communities and exemplifies the "notoriously diffuse and illusive phenomenon [of organized crime which] constitutes a perfect motivation for expanding penal and procedural law and the powers of the police" (von Hofer and Tham, 2013, p. 46). In a speech, the Minister of the Interior, Mikael Damberg said:

The government also wants to give the police more powers and new tools in border zones, which can be of great importance in the fight against cross-border crime. Step by step, with determination and perseverance, we will push back crime and make Sweden safer. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019e)

Discussions of interventions specifically directed at the so-called vulnerable areas, code for poor immigrant communities, can be understood as a policing of the invisible border hundreds of miles away from any geographic border. Narratives that discuss needing "a strong police presence in vulnerable areas... where it is needed most" and "open street sale" of drugs (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019j), are allusions to racialized ghettos and the breakdown of public order.

The narrative of honor-related issues or *hedersproblematik* includes discussions of female genital mutilation, child marriage, and honor-related violence and oppression (*hedersrelaterat våld och förtryck*) (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020a). These discussions are built on the foundation of extreme character polarization and "deep, cultural resentment" (Kramer, 2020, p. 137). Discussion of honor-related violence functions to construct perpetrators as evil, backwards, or sick and to ascribe these values to communities of African or the Middle Eastern immigrants deepening the polarization between "ordinary Swede" and "foreigner" (von Hofer & Tham, 2013, p. 45).⁹

Discussion: Traveling stories

The two types of logic narratives in this dataset are split between western crime control logics reconfigured for acceptance in the Swedish context and traditionally Swedish crime control logics used to supplement expansionist ideas. Individual responsibility narratives, emphasizing ideas of deterrence and just deserts, can be found in some of the most infamous strategies that led to mass incarceration in America, including Broken Windows Theory, Three Strikes Laws, and Mandatory Minimum Sentences. While there are some narratives in this dataset reminiscent of correctionalism, these no longer hold a dominant or hegemonic place in Swedish penal policy. They do, however, have an important role in winning "social approval" (Smith, 2005, p. 18) and ensuring narratives are accepted in a new cultural context. Since welfare and rehabilitation still hold a strong place in the commonly held criminological attitudes of most Swedes, these narratives are used to "align events with normative cultural codes" by framing crime control through the traditional values of the Swedish welfare state (Smith, 2005, p. 18).

Crime prevention discussions often mention using welfare initiatives, such as increasing investments in schools and social services, to address the social factors that lead to crime. While narratives about investing in welfare-based solutions to reducing crime are present, they are used in a supplementary position:

The program is about both tougher penalties, new powerful tools for law enforcement, but also social efforts that stop recruitment to gangs in the long term. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019e)

In the coming years' state budgets, therefore, all other expenditure increases need to be tested against more resources for welfare and security in the country. Again, welfare and crime, that's where our focus is, that's where everyone's focus needs to be. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019f)

Welfare and security, that's what our mission boils down to. Strong welfare, strong police, strong preventive measures, a strong society. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019f)

Correctionalist narratives are either paired with or overpowered by punitive crime control initiatives. Some publications discuss the need for "both long-term welfare initiatives and strong measures against crime" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2016a). However, the following example demonstrates how social initiatives are sandwiched between punitive interventions:

We have two tasks: to reduce crime and increase security...When it comes to gang crime, the measures are well known... It is about increased penalties for virtually all crimes committed by this group of criminals... And it's about expanded legal powers and better technical tools...But its also about targeted social initiatives to break recruitment into gangs: investment in schools in vulnerable areas, reduced costs for LVU care, social services in the evenings and weekends... It is about faster prosecution so that those who have committed crimes get a quick response from society. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020d)

While talk of using welfare to support community responses to crime has not disappeared, it is clear it has taken a backseat.

The best example of a true nod towards rehabilitation in this dataset is the gang defector program. These narratives discuss providing support and resources for programs that help people who want to leave a gang and move away from a 'criminal lifestyle' (Government Offices of Sweden, 2015). The National Defector Program is presented as an initiative that "benefit[s]... the entire society" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2015) by supporting former gang members in helping them find treatment, training, and work (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019k). This narrative competes with tough on crime narratives that describe fighting against gangs. However, the two narratives are not incompatible and are used together in the Group Violence Intervention (GVI) strategy. A newspaper description of its implementation in Malmö illustrates this interplay:

Sluta Skjut has been based around so-called 'call-ins', in which known gang members on probation are asked to attend meetings, where law enforcement officials warn them that

if shootings and explosions continue, they and the groups around them will be subject to intense focus from police. (Nilsson, 2021)

In this strategy, the call-ins and defector programs are offered to people involved in gangs, but not without the threat of prison following close behind. Similar to the incongruent coexistence of humanitarian discourse in border policing described by Franko and Gundhus, the paradoxical cooperation of rehabilitation and tough on crime stories can be used to legitimize or soften punitive sanctions by claiming that gang members were offered a way out and notified of the consequences of their non-compliance (Franko and Gundhus, 2015, p. 13).

Rather than rehabilitation universally offered to all offenders, it is now the individual's responsibility to choose between rehabilitation and crime. The rehabilitative sanction that was once a benefit of the welfare state accessible to all is now only available to deserving individuals. Narratives like these shift the responsibility onto the individual, subtly changing the narrative about the primary factors leading to crime away from social conditions and firmly onto individual choices (Wacquant, 1999):

[I]t is true that an individual is always responsible for his actions and always has a choice, but it is also true that social vulnerability is a breeding ground for crime. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021a)

The layering of correctionalist ideas alongside individual responsibility narratives adapts punitive ideas for acceptance in the Swedish cultural context. This adaptation serves the dual purpose of lowering social causes of crime “to the ranks of excuses in order to better justify individual sanctions” (Wacquant, 1999, p. 343), while also proposing a uniquely Swedish middle way, retaining the façade of a benevolent welfare state.

One of the best examples of this hybridization at work is Malmö's aforementioned deadly violence prevention program “Stop Shooting” (*Sluta Skjut*), designed after an American “focused deterrence” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021c) strategy called Group Violence Intervention (GVI):

A central starting point is that the majority of all serious crime in a society can be linked to a few individuals. To reduce violence, society must direct its resources towards these individuals and the groups to which they belong. Society sends a clear message to the violent groups that violence must end and that acts of violence have consequences. The message is also that society wants well and that there is help and support for those who want to leave crime. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021c)

Deterrence efforts meant to ‘send a clear message’ lead to harsher penalties and longer prison sentences. Then Minister of Justice and Migration, Morgan Johansson, builds on this adapted theory-story, saying:

Stop Shooting is a concrete way of working that puts a concrete ultimatum in a language that the criminals understand. To succeed in the fight against crime, we must both expand traditional methods but also think new and look at other countries that have

similar problems. Targeted measures against the small group of serious criminals give great results. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021c)

In discussing *Sluta Skjut*, policymakers eagerly embrace the crime control strategies of their American counterparts. Crime narratives from the United States are “spectacularly mobile” (Fleetwood, 2019, p. 39). Closely following the process of dissemination, adaptation, and academization (Wacquant, 1999), American crime control strategies are shared with Swedes, adapted to the cultural context, and formalized through theory-stories like GVI. As part of this process, policy makers travel across the Atlantic in what Wacquant would call a “carceral excursion” (Wacquant, 1999, p. 340):

In September 2016, Morgan Johansson, officials from the Ministry of Justice and representatives from Brå and NNSC [National Network for Safe Communities] in New York visited and met David Kennedy and received information about GVI. The idea arose that the method could be transferred to Swedish conditions. Brå obtained the strategy for Sweden and, together with the Police Authority, initiated a trial operation in Malmö between 2018 and 2020. In November 2020, the process evaluation of *Sluta Skjut* was published in Malmö. It showed that it is possible to implement the American GVI strategy in a Swedish context. Based on an international state of knowledge and experience from the implementation in Malmö, the assessment was made that the strategy is worth trying in more cities in Sweden that are victims of serious violent crime. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021c)

Many of the themes discussed in these individual responsibility narratives – deterrence, insecurity, urban violence, vulnerable areas, and juvenile delinquency – are directly from the pre-constructed punitive talking points exported by American think tanks (Wacquant, 1999, p. 344). The adaptation of these American ideas in the Swedish context requires the hybridization of individual responsibility narratives. The selective mentions of social factors leading to crime give a symbolic nod to the need to address social conditions, while supporting targeted punitive policies that increase inequality. Fassin argues that politics of humanitarianism, the paradoxical display of compassion by those charged with making punishment more efficient, has become a salient way of governing in situations of precariousness and inequality (Fassin, 2011). Rather than discussing injustice and rights, the political discourse focuses on compassion and assistance, creating “fantasies of goodness and moral community” on the part of punitive institutions (Fassin, 2011; Franko & Gundhus, 2015, p. 13).

Conclusion

In analyzing “formal accounts of punishment” (Pratt, 2022, p. 113), this paper identifies the shifts in cultural conditions which have impacted Swedish penal policy. The collective identities found in this paper highlight ‘who’ crime control measures are targeted at. The three types of intervention narratives open a window into ‘how’ crime control is meant to be carried out. Finally, logic narratives help to understand the ‘why,’ explaining the rationale inspiring the strategies proposed and implemented. The narratives found in the dataset restructure the meaning of *trygghet* and welfare, central to Sweden’s self-image, to make room for exclusionary ideas of security which run contrary to formerly held beliefs about Swedish crime control. These logics also connect themes currently permeating

Swedish politics with crime control strategies from other nations, allowing for a better understanding of how stories travel and adapt to new cultural contexts.

Narrative criminology is well placed to study how stories about crime and criminals travel internationally with dramatic ramifications, allowing for analysis of how stories are altered to fit into new cultural contexts (Fleetwood, 2019). This paper demonstrates specific ways that American crime narratives travel to Sweden to support the advancement of stricter, more punitive policies. The recognizable cultural symbols of social welfare were placed alongside many of these punitive policies and individual responsibility narratives, allowing them to adapt to the Swedish context. The five narratives discussed above serve as examples of ideas about crime and punishment which lend themselves well to adaption elsewhere (Fleetwood, 2019), and have been universalized and accepted as self-evident in Sweden against the backdrop of the easily identified foreign criminal other. It is also important for narrative criminologists to understand how the targeting of these narratives towards marginalized groups serves to reinforce and advance existing inequalities.

This paper contributes to the already robust discussion on Nordic penal systems by using narrative criminology to analyze how crime stories shape the way safety and security should be understood and achieved. This unique dataset, created by institutions responsible for punishment, shows how the government promoted narratives about crime which link safety and security to the exclusionary punishment of the foreign criminal other, setting the stage for future expansionist policies. Many discussions of Nordic exceptionalism suggest that “when Nordic prison conditions and practices are examined against the US, the Nordics come from another Penal Planet” (Lappi-Seppälä, 2019; Pratt, 2022, p. 120). Yet, much is lost in this analysis. The examination of narratives uncovers that, despite statistical differences, Sweden is adopting many of the same beliefs and assumptions about crime control as many western nations with high incarceration rates. It is narratives, borrowed from other countries and adapted to the Swedish context, which reshape the meaning of welfare and security and pave the way for Sweden’s penal expansion.

Statement of Data Availability

During the time this research was being conducted, the full collection and all the included documents were publicly available on the Government Offices of Sweden website <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/ett-tryggare-sverige/>. The collection has since been removed from the website, but the collection is still available on the internet archive, web.archive.org. While the link to the collection home page is no longer active, links to individual documents cited in the Reference section are still available on the [regeringen.se](https://www.regeringen.se) website at the time of publication.

Notes

1. The full collection was found at <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/ett-tryggare-sverige/>. The collection has since been removed from the website but a full archive is available at web.archive.org. While the link to the collection home page is no longer active, links to individual documents cited in the Reference section are still available at the time of publication.
2. Referrals (*Remiss*) are documents about draft laws being submitted to either the law council (*Lagrådsremiss*) or a list of different government or private institutions that are either effected by or have expertise in the topic of the draft law.
3. Bills (*proposition*) are proposed legislation that have gone through the inquiry and referral process and are sent to the Parliament (*Riksdag*) for approval.

4. Committee Directives (*kommittédirektiv*) are the starting point for a government committee appointing a state inquiry to investigate a certain issue.
5. Ministry series and memoranda (*Departementsserien och promemorior*) are written about investigations within the Government Offices that are published in memoranda format or published in the Ministry Series (Ds).
6. Government Assignments (*Regeringsuppdrag*) commission a certain Government institution to analyze, evaluate, investigate, or do other research into a specific policy area.
7. State Public Investigations (*Statens offentliga utredningar*) are conducted by an appointed special investigator who investigates a certain issue and compiles the results in a report published in The Swedish Public Investigations, SOU.
8. In Sweden, the word *förort*, which is translated as ‘suburb’ is often used to refer to racialized ghetto areas. Since this word is only used in once in the dataset, I have chosen to use the word ‘urban’ in this paper because it allows for more generalization and continuity with other criminological literature.
9. Von Hofer and Tham describe discussions of honor related violence as a way to provoke public outrage especially in Sweden which prides itself on its strong policies on gender equality (von Hofer and Tham, 2013, p. 45). This allusion towards immigrant cultures and gender is also one of the few times gender is present in the data. Criminals are strictly constructed as men and boys, so women are only present as victims or people threatened by crime.

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