

From privacy to protection: The reframing of integrity in Sweden's camera surveillance politics

Cecilia Hansen Löfstrand

Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg,

cecilia.lofstrand@socwork.gu.se

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1787-106X>

Abstract

This article analyses the transformed politics of police-managed CCTV (closed-circuit television) surveillance in public spaces in Sweden, a country traditionally committed to individual privacy and liberal democratic values. Drawing on a longitudinal analysis spanning two decades, the study examines governmental documents, political speeches, and interviews with representatives of the Swedish Police Authority to explore this shift. It investigates how policymakers have reframed surveillance as a tool for safeguarding personal integrity, redefining integrity as freedom from crime rather than freedom from state intrusion. Following the 2010 constitutional reforms, which reinforced privacy protections, Sweden nonetheless witnessed a significant expansion of police surveillance powers, culminating in the 2018 Camera Surveillance Act. By 2023, a rise in gun violence led the government to frame police CCTV surveillance of public spaces as essential to societal stability, introducing measures to double camera installations and integrate advanced technologies such as facial recognition. While these policies have garnered increasing public support, they disproportionately affect marginalised communities, raising critical concerns about equity and democratic freedoms. By tracing this 20-year evolution, the article examines the reframing of personal integrity and the broader implications of police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces for democracy and individual rights.

Keywords

CCTV, police-managed CCTV surveillance, privacy and integrity, democratic governance, longitudinal policy analysis

Introduction

Sweden has long been characterised as a “prototype of a surveillance society” (Flaherty, 1989, p. 4). However, the use of open-street CCTV (closed-circuit television) systems—established, controlled and operated by the police to monitor public spaces—has historically remained limited. State surveillance has primarily functioned through the personal identification number system and extensive governmental records, which facilitate access to welfare benefits and are thus widely regarded as benign. In contrast, police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces has traditionally been associated with coercive state control and the image of a “Big Brother society” (Björklund, 2011). Rooted in the European Convention on Human Rights, the Swedish constitution prioritises individual integrity as a safeguard of democracy, limiting state intrusion into private life in order to protect civil liberties. Consequently, police CCTV surveillance of public spaces has long been

viewed as an infringement on personal integrity, necessitating strict regulation and limited application.

However, a significant shift has recently occurred in Swedish politics, reframing police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces as essential for crime prevention, the improvement of crime clearance rates, and public safety. Public support for such measures has also increased (Eneman & Ljungberg, 2023). The purpose of this article is to examine the evolving role and interpretation of police-operated open-street CCTV surveillance in Sweden, with particular emphasis on its relationship to the concept of personal integrity. Drawing on a longitudinal analysis of policy developments and political discourse between 2004 and 2024, I explore how police-operated CCTV surveillance of public spaces has been reframed — shifting from a perceived threat to individual integrity to a mechanism for safeguarding citizens against crime. I also discuss some of the democratic implications of this shift.

The expansion of open-street CCTV has been extensively explored in criminology, surveillance studies, and criminal justice research. Scholars have demonstrated that such policing methods are often normalised in the absence of democratic deliberation or contestation over their broader societal implications (Norris & Armstrong, 1999; Norris et al., 2004; Sætnan et al., 2004; Flyghed, 2002; Goold et al., 2013; Simon, 2007). This normalisation is closely linked to shifting public expectations of state protection, whereby human rights are increasingly interpreted as the right to safety and security, rather than solely as safeguards against state overreach (Günther, 2013; Lomell, 2014; Simon, 2007; Zedner, 2003, 2010). As a result, this evolving understanding of rights has served to legitimise greater state control and an expansion of police-managed CCTV surveillance in public spaces.

Moreover, research highlights how public anxieties about violent crime, terrorism and migration have been central to the adoption of video surveillance technologies, with these measures increasingly justified in terms of public protection. At the same time, scholars have raised critical concerns about their implications for civil rights and liberties (Aas et al., 2008; Adams & Ferryman, 2015; Goold, 2002, Goold, 2010; Goold et al., 2013; Zedner, 2003, 2010). Taken together, this body of scholarship suggests that the growing reliance on state-sponsored open-street CCTV surveillance reflects a broader political and social transformation, in which security concerns reshape long-standing understandings of individual integrity and civil liberties.

This article contributes to the field by analysing the political reframing of integrity within the context of Swedish camera surveillance policy. It demonstrates how recent surveillance initiatives have been legitimised through strategic political discourse—particularly in governmental investigation reports, press conferences, and official speeches—thereby enabling the expansion of police-managed CCTV surveillance in public spaces. Sweden represents a distinctive case, having reinterpreted its constitutional principles to accommodate political ambitions to appear “tough on crime”, while simultaneously extending the reach of police-operated CCTV surveillance in public spaces.

Police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces

In recent decades, Swedish crime policy has undergone a notable transformation. Rather than simply reflecting a rightward political shift, this change signals a broader governance realignment. As Andersson (2024, p. 52) argues, Swedish policy has moved from addressing social problems through welfare to managing public order through crime control. The

focus has shifted from reforming the offender to protecting “law-abiding citizens” through increased regulation and surveillance (Andersson, 2024, p. 59).

This expansion of state control is closely tied to a broader contestation over public space. Public space, understood as both a physical and symbolic arena, is shaped by social, political and economic power relations (Mitchell, 1995, p. 117). Two competing visions dominate this discourse: one frames public space as a democratic forum for political expression and collective presence, while the other prioritises order, security, and commercial utility (Mitchell, 1995; Goold, 2021). Surveillance technologies, particularly police-operated open-street CCTV, increasingly structure these spaces, transforming them from “spaces for representation”—publicly accessible areas in democratic societies where interaction unfolds and groups become public (Mitchell, 1995, p. 115f.)—into what Goold (2021) terms “state spaces”: sites defined and controlled by state logics of security.

This transformation also raises constitutional questions in Sweden, where individual integrity is enshrined as a democratic safeguard. Yet, despite this legal protection, the 2020s have seen a rapid expansion of police surveillance tools—open-street CCTV, drones and body-worn cameras—prompting questions about how such developments are politically and legally justified (cf. Lister & Rowe, 2016; Zedner, 2003).

To analyse this shift, the study draws on Scott and Lyman (1968) concept of “accounts”—discursive strategies used to explain and legitimise contested actions. Accounts, defined as statements explaining unanticipated behaviour, are classified into justifications (accepting responsibility but denying negative implications) and excuses (admitting the act’s negativity while denying full responsibility) (Scott & Lyman, 1968, pp. 46–47). Justifications assert the permissibility of actions by arguing they serve a greater good, addressing supposed harm, or fulfilling obligations to a broader collective interest (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 51). In the Swedish case, political actors primarily rely on justifications, framing expanded police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces as a moral obligation to protect public safety. These discursive strategies play a key role in reframing the meaning of “integrity” to align with new security imperatives.

Analysis of the Swedish approach to police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces

This study draws on a range of empirical materials, including directives to governmental investigation committees, investigation reports, legislative proposals and enacted laws addressing CCTV surveillance of public spaces and its implications for individual integrity over a two-decade period (2004–2024). Specifically, the analysis incorporates seven governmental investigation reports (SOU, 2007:22; SOU, 2008:3; SOU (2008:125); SOU, 2016:41; SOU, 2017: 52; SOU, 2018: 62; SOU, 2024: 27) and three legislative proposals (Prop. 2009/10:80; Prop. 2017/18: 231; Prop. 2018/19: 147). In addition, five televised governmental press conferences and speeches by the current Swedish Prime Minister have been included with all relevant material transcribed (see *Televised press conferences and speeches* in the reference list).

Together, the above-mentioned government sources illuminate the evolving governmental approach to CCTV surveillance in relation to individual integrity. Complementing these are data capturing the Swedish Police Authority’s stance on police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces and associated privacy concerns. This includes internal documentation outlining the Authority’s justifications as required by current legislation, as well as interviews conducted with twelve representatives of the organisation. These individuals include legal experts and personnel involved in camera surveillance. The

interviews, carried out between August 2023 and June 2024, each lasted between one and two hours and were transcribed for analysis.

The analysis began with the extraction of textual accounts that either critiqued or justified police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces in terms of individual integrity. These accounts were organised chronologically (2004–2024) to trace the transformation of Swedish policies and the reframing of individual integrity. Subsequent analysis focused on the justifications provided for the use of police-managed CCTV surveillance, the stated objectives of such surveillance, and its relationship to individual integrity. This process involved identifying key justifications, especially those reflecting evolving conceptions of integrity, and exploring how these justifications have transformed over time. By examining justifications for (or against) police-managed open-street CCTV surveillance over a 20 year period, the study reveals a gradual reconfiguration of the concept of integrity and its centrality to the emerging politics of surveillance. Accordingly, this article foregrounds the shifting meanings of integrity over time and its interaction with the evolving landscape of police CCTV surveillance policies in Sweden.

Both governmental and interview accounts provide not only explicit statements but also implicit assumptions regarding the deployment of police-managed CCTV surveillance in public spaces. As noted by scholars such as Schön and Rein (1994) and Scott and Lyman (1968), justifications often rely on implicit “background expectancies” or “unstated assumptions”. Political statements and accounts in interviews with police representatives regarding CCTV surveillance are not mere reflections of objective realities (Bacchi, 2009); rather, they function as representations of policing problems that are framed as solvable through surveillance technologies. These representations, read as truth claims, actively shape societal perceptions and contribute to the transformation of social and political realities (Asdal, 2015).

In sum, this article examines governmental and professional accounts to elucidate the justifications used to promote the utility of police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces for criminal justice purposes. The narrative begins in the early 2000s, a period when safeguarding individual integrity and restricting open-street CCTV surveillance were prominent concerns on the political agenda.

Restricting police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces: Safeguarding integrity and democracy

Use of CCTV surveillance was regulated early in Sweden, as early as the 1970s—that is, long before the establishment of police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces (Björklund, 2011). Following the revised legislation introduced in 1998, the number of surveillance systems increased, and the police invested in local, small scale CCTV systems (Björklund, 2011). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, concerns about technological advancements and video surveillance were prominent on the political agenda, and in 2010, the Swedish constitution was amended to safeguard individual integrity, a measure deemed necessary to prevent excessive use of CCTV surveillance and to preserve a fully functioning democracy.

Between 2004 and 2008, two closely related governmental investigations were carried out. On 7 April 2004, the Social Democratic-led Swedish government convened a parliamentary committee to analyse legislation relating to personal integrity, assess the need for additional protections, and, where necessary, propose new provisions. This *Integrity Protection Committee* published an interim report in 2007 (SOU, 2007:22) and a final report in 2008 (SOU, 2008:3). Concurrently, on 1 June 2004, the same government

established another parliamentary committee tasked with reviewing constitutional law to strengthen and deepen Swedish democracy. This second committee delivered its final report in 2008 (SOU 2008:125), recommending significant constitutional reforms.

Building on the findings of these investigations, the Swedish government proposed several constitutional amendments, which were approved by Parliament in 2010. A key reform was the strengthened protection of individual integrity, articulated as essential for safeguarding democracy. The government emphasised the importance of respecting and protecting individuals' self-determination, freedom of opinion and expression, and privacy. The constitutional amendments—introduced into Chapter 2, Section 6 of the Instrument of Government—were implemented to protect individuals against significant intrusions arising from surveillance and the processing of personal data, such as those associated with police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces. These reforms reflected broader societal anxieties regarding the erosion of privacy in the digital age (The Swedish Parliament, 2023) and represent the constitutional recognition of individual integrity as a fundamental right in an increasingly digitalised society.

Only a few years later, in May 2014, the Moderate-led government established the *Integrity Committee*. This committee, which reported to the Social Democratic coalition government (in office from October 2014 to January 2019), was charged with analysing risks to personal integrity posed by the growing use of information technologies. The mission statement explicitly identified video surveillance as a particularly clear risk to personal integrity. In its interim report, the committee observed:

The very fact that camera surveillance takes place is considered an infringement of personal privacy, even if the surveillance is only done in real time and no recording is involved. If the surveillance is recorded, the intrusion becomes greater (SOU, 2016:41, p. 108).

The report highlighted that the integration of camera systems with large databases, the use of biometric technologies such as facial recognition, the increasing prevalence of CCTV cameras, drones and body-worn cameras, combined with data storage, synchronisation and automated image analysis, posed serious risks to personal integrity (SOU, 2016:41, pp. 109, 558). At the same time, the committee noted the state's obligation to take effective measures to ensure individual safety, recognising the growing importance of video surveillance for intelligence and investigative purposes (SOU, 2016:41, p. 473).

In its final report (SOU, 2017:52), the committee argued for strengthening protections for personal integrity to balance this fundamental right against other societal interests, such as public safety and crime prevention. Notably, the committee expressed significant criticism (SOU, 2017:52, p. 20), referencing the Instrument of Government, which mandates that public power must be exercised with respect for the equal value of all individuals and for their freedom and dignity. The committee argued that this principle was inconsistently applied and often inadequately upheld.

Taken together, this illustrates that the right to individual integrity is firmly embedded within the Swedish constitution. Since 2004, government appointed committees have been investigating the threats posed by information technologies, particularly video surveillance, to democracy and individual integrity. By 2010, the Instrument of Government was amended to further ensure civil liberties. By 2017, yet another government-appointed committee continued to emphasise the necessity of safeguarding personal integrity, even

while recognising the state's obligation to protect individual safety. Remarkably, in 2023—just six years later—the government's launch of a “camera offensive” marked a decisive shift. The following sections will trace this transformation, examining how it was facilitated and realised.

Promoting police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces as integrity protection

The following sections trace the transformation, from 2017 to 2024, from a politics of police-managed CCTV surveillance that emphasised the necessity of safeguarding personal integrity through restricted use, to a markedly new politics that foregrounds the state's obligation to protect individual integrity—reinterpreted as safety from crime—through the expanding use of police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces. Hence, as will be shown, the longstanding tension between police-operated open-street surveillance and the right to personal privacy was discursively reframed during this period. Political discourse posited that police-operated CCTV surveillance of public spaces does not erode but rather safeguards personal privacy. This rearticulation aligns with a broader shift in Swedish crime policy, which has increasingly prioritised the maintenance of public order and citizen protection, a turn discernible not only in Sweden but in Norway and other parts of Europe as well (Andersson, 2024; Lomell, 2014; Günther, 2013). Central to the contemporary Swedish crime policy are mechanisms deployed to protect law-abiding citizens such as stricter sentencing, heightened police presence, and an expanded use of police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces. The legitimacy of this contemporary approach to crime policy is grounded in the protection of a constructed “general public”, for whom public spaces must remain open and free from crime (Andersson, 2024, p. 63).

Justifying police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces: The politics of protection

On 14 September 2017, a committee was commissioned by the Social Democratic-led government, which held office from October 2014 to January 2019, to propose legislative amendments facilitating police use of CCTV surveillance. The public investigation report (SOU, 2018:62) *affirmed* that the Swedish constitution guarantees the right to personal integrity, also in public spaces. However, the committee's report *simultaneously* recommended extending police-managed CCTV surveillance capabilities and *reframed* such surveillance as a measure that *enhances* personal integrity. It characterised crime and insecurity as the primary threats to individual privacy and asserted that police efforts to reduce crime through open-street CCTV would bolster the protection of individual freedoms and rights (SOU, 2018:62, p. 143). This marked the first effort in Swedish policy to redefine integrity as something safeguarded *through* police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces.

Subsequently, the government proposed repealing the existing Camera Surveillance Act and introducing a new law designed to expand opportunities for camera surveillance while ostensibly safeguarding privacy (Prop. 2017/2018:231, p. 1). The purpose of the new act was “to meet the need for camera surveillance for legitimate purposes and to protect persons against undue invasion of personal integrity during such surveillance” (Prop. 2017/2018:231, p. 6). The proposal granted the Police Authority extensive powers to conduct open-street CCTV surveillance for various purposes, including the prevention and detection of criminal activity, investigation and prosecution of offences in high-crime areas, and addressing risks to life, health, safety or property. Surveillance was also deemed

legitimate for maintaining public order, mitigating disturbances, preventing accidents, and achieving other comparable objectives (Prop. 2017/2018:231, p. 8).

Although the list of justifiable motives for surveillance was expansive, the government identified only three considerations regarding the individual's interest in avoiding surveillance: how surveillance is conducted, the technologies used to protect personal integrity, and the areas subject to monitoring (Prop. 2017/2018:231, p. 8). This implicit devaluation of individual privacy was not explicitly acknowledged. Instead, the government introduced a new discourse centred on "integrity-enhancing" or "privacy-promoting" surveillance technologies (Prop. 2017/2018:231, p. 31). This discursive shift justified an expansion of police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces by claiming that surveillance technologies protect, rather than infringe upon, the personal integrity of individuals.

The proposed "integrity-enhancing" technologies included automated masking within surveillance footage to obscure individuals' identities unless necessary, as well as cameras that activated only in response to specific triggers such as alarms, unusual movement patterns, or distinctive sounds like gunfire or breaking glass (Prop. 2017/2018:231, p. 31). The Social Democratic government argued that the use of these technologies outweighed the individual's interest in avoiding surveillance, asserting that reduced crime and enhanced security resulting from such measures would ultimately improve privacy protection. This position was encapsulated in the claim that:

Camera surveillance typically involves an infringement of the right to protection of personal integrity. Increased opportunities to conduct camera surveillance can therefore entail higher risks for personal integrity. However, being exposed to crime can also constitute a violation of personal integrity. To the extent that increased opportunities to conduct camera surveillance lead to a reduction in crime, an improvement in privacy protection can be achieved (Prop. 2017/2018:231, p. 134).

In this framing, camera surveillance was portrayed as a dual safeguard—both against crime and for personal integrity.

The government subsequently proposed amending the Camera Surveillance Act to permit specific authorities, including the Coast Guard, Police Authority, Security Police and Swedish Customs, to conduct CCTV surveillance without prior approval from the Swedish Data Protection Authority. This amendment aimed "to improve the possibility of fighting and prosecuting crime with the help of camera surveillance" (Prop. 2018/2019:147, p. 1). These authorities were tasked with internally balancing their interests in surveillance against individuals' interest in avoiding it. Despite this significant delegation of power, the government maintained that the legislative changes would not "weaken privacy protection in any significant way" (Prop. 2018/2019:147, p. 33). It further asserted that "integrity-protective technologies", such as masking housing entrances and windows in CCTV cameras, provided sufficient safeguards for personal privacy (Prop. 2018/2019:147, p. 37). In its final assessment, the government concluded that the proposed legislation ensured "strong protection of the individual's personal integrity and fundamental freedoms and rights" (Prop. 2018/2019:147, p. 51).

In 2018, the new Camera Surveillance Act (SFS 2018:1200) was enacted, and amendments effective from 1 January 2020 further expanded the Swedish Police Authority's ability to use CCTV surveillance by removing the requirement to obtain prior supervisory approval for monitoring public spaces. The Police Authority has justified its approach

by asserting that individuals captured on open-street CCTV cameras may themselves be potential victims of crime, thereby warranting a reduced emphasis on their privacy interests. Interviews with police representatives revealed a perceived increase in public support for police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces, which is often viewed as a means of reducing crime and enhancing safety in public spaces such as streets, parks, and residential areas. By increasing security, such surveillance is argued to strengthen personal integrity, redefined as the right to live free from crime and fear. One police representative reflected on this evolving approach:

At the beginning, we didn't know—we thought it wasn't possible to use this tool [video surveillance of public spaces] within the framework of the law. However, with the help of the legal experts, we started to focus on our particularly vulnerable areas. There was a problem. The debate also shifted. Camera surveillance is not only privacy-infringing; it can also be privacy-promoting if it is conducted in a controlled manner and with transparency. [...] It goes without saying that there is a very important privacy aspect when an authority monitors someone with cameras, but it is also a violation of privacy to be subjected to serious crime (Interviewee no. 9).

This perspective highlights a shift in the balance between individual privacy and public safety, suggesting that being subject to police-managed open-street CCTV surveillance may be a lesser violation of integrity than being a victim of crime. However, such surveillance is not evenly distributed in society's urban areas. The Police Authority prioritises socio-economically disadvantaged suburban areas, described as “particularly vulnerable areas”, citing higher crime risks and lower cooperation with law enforcement. A legal expert explained that this focus aims to “protect those people” and improve safety:

There should also be a strong interest in not being exposed to crime, which can outweigh the possible violation of privacy that image recording entails. [...] You don't want to be watched, but you want to be exposed to crime even less (Interviewee no. 11).

This prioritisation raises concerns about equity in state surveillance, as disadvantaged areas face heightened scrutiny. Meanwhile, some officials acknowledged a paradox: terrorist threats feared by the public are more likely to materialise in central urban areas frequented by “ordinary people”:

It takes significant justification to have camera surveillance in the city centre, where it's ordinary people who are going about their lives—moving around, walking, and including tourists. You shouldn't be under police surveillance. However, unfortunately, if something happens, it is more likely to occur in the city centre rather than in a vulnerable area (Interviewee no. 5).

Despite this, resources remain concentrated in marginalised suburbs, reinforcing patterns of over-policing in these communities. People residing in these communities are thus “those most likely to suffer a significant loss of privacy” (Goold, 2021, p. 171). The growing acceptance of surveillance and the reframing of integrity reflect broader political and societal shifts. Historically, personal integrity in Sweden was defined as freedom from state-sanctioned CCTV surveillance, both in private and public spaces. In recent years,

however, integrity has been reinterpreted as freedom from exposure to crime, thereby justifying expanded police-operated CCTV surveillance of public spaces for the perceived greater good (cf. Scott & Lyman, 1968).

Invoking “domestic terror” to justify police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces

Prior research has demonstrated that high-profile crimes often reshape public attitudes toward open-street CCTV surveillance, thereby influencing political decisions on such surveillance (Norris & Armstrong, 1999; Norris et al., 2004; Lomell, 2007; Lyon et al., 2012). In Norway, for instance, police-operated open-street CCTV was introduced in Oslo after two widely publicised murders, following a media-driven shift in narratives that framed such surveillance as a necessary tool against violence (Lomell, 2007). A similar trajectory was observed in the United Kingdom, where resistance to mass surveillance weakened following intense media coverage of the murder of toddler James Bulger by two ten-year-olds (Norris & Armstrong, 1999). In Sweden, however, neither the 2003 murder of Foreign Minister Anna Lindh in a Stockholm shopping mall, nor the 2017 terrorist attack in Stockholm when five people were killed and many more injured, generated enough political momentum for the kind of expanded CCTV surveillance agenda that we see today.

Arguably, a political reinterpretation of the “integrity issue” paved the way for legislative reforms and legitimisation of police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces under the pretext of public safety and security. In Sweden, from 2023 onwards, the newly elected government actively promoted expansion of police-operated open-street CCTV surveillance as a means of protecting the public. In response to a dramatic rise in deadly gun violence in 2022, and political discussions highlighting the unusually high number of lethal shootings even by European standards (Hradilova Selin et al., 2024), government representatives began portraying the nation as being in a state of “domestic terror”. In this context, individual integrity and civil liberties were addressed not as impediments to effective law enforcement (cf. Lomell, 2007; Norris & Armstrong, 1999), but by framing police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces as protecting the integrity of “ordinary citizens”. It was asserted that it was serious crime (rather than police-operated open-street CCTV surveillance) that posed a threat to Swedish democracy (Andersson, 2024).

The coalition government formed after the 2022 general election—a minority coalition consisting of the liberal-conservative Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, reliant on parliamentary support from the Sweden Democrats (a nationalist anti-immigration party)—prioritised economic reforms, stricter immigration controls and intensified law-and-order measures. In line with these objectives, the new government initiated a series of radical political measures in 2023, aiming to expand police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces. On 23 March 2023, it launched a public investigation tasked with proposing ways to extend the use of such surveillance. In a nationally televised address on the escalating violence in Sweden, delivered by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson in Stockholm on Thursday, 28 September 2023, a stark new portrayal of the country’s situation was presented:

Now more and more children and completely innocent people are affected by the gross violence. I cannot emphasise enough how serious the situation is. Sweden has never seen anything like it before. No other country in Europe sees anything like it. The worst

affected are those who live in socially vulnerable areas. [...] All those who would like to tell the police about the gangs' reign of terror, but don't dare – for fear of their own lives and those of their children. All of them, all of you should know that I am on your side. We will hunt down the gangs, and we will defeat them. We will bring them to justice. If they are Swedish citizens, they should be locked up for very long sentences. If they are foreign nationals, they must also be deported. [...] It is an irresponsible immigration policy and a failed integration that has brought us here. [...] Swedish legislation is not designed for gang wars and child soldiers. But we are now changing that.

The depiction of Sweden as being in a state of “terror” from “gangs”, “child soldiers”, and “foreign nationals” was subsequently employed to justify extensive legislative reforms. This perspective was further elaborated by Martin Melin, a member of the Justice Department, during a government press conference on 3 October 2023:

There is currently a major restructuring of legal policy. [...] It is time we shift the focus from the perpetrator to the victim. It is also about acting against gang criminals and repeat offenders. You can say that this government is putting its foot down firmly and marking that it is not okay to be a criminal. We are developing more effective tools for crime fighting, above all the police have requested more cameras. Now you get it.

When questioned about whether such an expanded surveillance would infringe upon individual privacy in public spaces, Melin argued that public concern was centred not on privacy but on the pressing need for decisive action. At the same governmental press conference addressing “violent and organised crime” (on 3 October 2023), it was claimed that “the escalating situation in society with increasingly serious gang violence” justified legislative reforms and necessitated that these changes be “fast tracked”. Government representatives further asserted that police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces, including facial recognition and automatic number plate reading, was essential to identify “gang members”. The current government's strategy to show force and attract voters thus focuses on getting tough on crime, reasserting police authority and supporting victims (cf. Loader, 2020, p. 1184). Fear of gun violence was heightened by speaking of “domestic terror” and increasingly invoked to legitimise police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces.

At a nationally televised press conference on 12 October 2023, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson announced a “camera offensive” justified by portraying the Swedish public as being in a state of “imminent danger” and emphasising the “danger in delay”. The Prime Minister painted a dire picture of impending societal collapse, employing the terminology of “domestic terrorism” to describe the situation:

I have often likened these shootings and bombings to domestic terrorists, and for good reason. These criminal networks instil fear and terror in society; they possess a large capital of violence that affects completely innocent people.

At the same press conference (October 12, 2023), Johan Pehrsson, then Minister for Labour Market and Integration, likened the state's new approach to “a steel glove” and asserted the urgent need to “close the gates of hell that have been opened against the country of Sweden”. Scholarly work on Swedish crime policy (Heber, 2023; Lowe, 2024)

notes that immigrants are increasingly portrayed as “criminals” or “gang criminals”. As Lowe (2024, p. 8) observes, political discussions of “gang crime” frequently employ “coded language and muted racial inferences” with the archetype of the “gang criminal” in Sweden typically being “a dark-skinned, Muslim immigrant”. The implicit connection between crime and immigration further legitimises harsher anti-immigration policies as part of the government’s broader response.

Legislative amendments to expand police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces were supported by government-commissioned investigations, which highlighted the state’s responsibility to protect individuals from violations by others (SOU, 2024:27, p. 22), and argued that such surveillance enhances security and safeguards personal integrity (SOU, 2024:27, p. 32). Research cited also emphasised public support with findings that “more citizens think that the use of surveillance has a higher positive impact on personal integrity than a negative impact” (SOU, 2024:27, p. 151). Citizens reportedly expressed little concern over privacy risks, instead framing integrity as the right to feel safe. However, the extensive media coverage of escalating violence amplified fears and shaped public perceptions (Eneman & Ljungberg, 2023, p. 184; cf. Norris & Armstrong 1999; Lomell, 2007). The government-appointed investigators portrayed crime—particularly “fatal gun violence”, “explosions” and “shootings”—as among the most pressing societal challenges. Police expertise was cited, with officials asserting that surveillance cameras not only help prevent crime but also enhance citizens’ sense of security, portrayed as a key element of personal integrity (SOU 2024:27, pp. 190, 197). The investigators further concluded that being a victim of crime constitutes a violation of personal integrity, and that insecurity in public spaces negatively affects privacy. Consequently, they argued, reducing crime through surveillance ultimately enhances the protection of integrity (SOU 2024:27, p. 234).

Notably, in 2023 (21 October), Sweden’s Prime Minister, Ulf Kristersson, employed the phrase “The Moderates’ Reclaim the Streets” during his speech at the Moderates’ national conference. He was referring to the party’s efforts to restore safety in public spaces, particularly in areas affected by crime, by exclusion orders for “known criminals” in certain zones, alongside other legal interventions aimed at improving security in vulnerable neighbourhoods. The phrase “Reclaim the Streets” originates from a social movement that emerged in the United Kingdom during the 1990s (Jordan, 2009) seeking to reclaim public spaces, particularly streets, from commercial exploitation, transforming them into areas where people could gather, express themselves, and celebrate the freedom of the public realm. However, in a more right-wing political context, it serves as a metaphor or rallying cry to emphasise the need to restore traditional values, law and order, and a sense of safety in public spaces (Simon, 2007, p. 95). As used by the Swedish Prime Minister, it can thus be understood as part of a broader struggle over the control of public space (Goold, 2021).

At a press conference on 15 April 2024, Minister of Justice Gunnar Strömmer framed the reforms as an important way of meeting the state’s obligation to protect citizens from crimes that violate personal integrity. He attributed the public’s growing support for police-managed CCTV surveillance in public spaces to rising insecurity. Prime Minister Kristersson reiterated these themes in his speech at Almedalen on 26 June 2024, describing the expansion of surveillance tools as essential for protecting “the well-behaved majority”. He characterised this shift as a “paradigm change”, calling for a doubling of police-managed camera installations nationwide. Implicitly addressing potential criticisms of potential overreach, Kristersson remarked: “There is nothing that violates privacy more than being

exposed to serious crimes”, suggesting that surveillance enhances safety for “ordinary citizens”.

These developments underscore a marked shift in Swedish crime policy, with the government prioritising public security over privacy. The reforms also align with broader objectives to reinforce state authority and implement stricter migration policies, ostensibly to safeguard “the well-behaved majority”. Consistent with previous research (Norris & Armstrong, 1999; Lomell, 2007), the discourse reflects the image of a state of exception, drawn on by politicians to legitimise police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces. However, rather than explicitly arguing that security must take precedence over civil liberties (Norris et al., 2004), the very concept of integrity was redefined.

Historically, a core objective of Swedish legislation has been to regulate CCTV surveillance in public spaces to safeguard individual integrity. Until recently, permits were required for open-street CCTV surveillance of public spaces; this requirement was lifted for the Police Authority in 2020 and for all other actors in 2025. Although constitutional amendments were considered in 2023, none were enacted. Instead, a discursive reconfiguration of the concept of individual integrity—and of police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces—has taken place.

The reframing of integrity in Sweden’s camera surveillance politics: Democratic implications

The purpose of this study has been to examine how the Swedish state’s understanding and use of open-street CCTV surveillance has evolved over time, particularly in relation to the concept of personal integrity, and to discuss some of the democratic implications of this transformation. The political trajectory traced herein highlights a significant shift in the framing of integrity and police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces—one that prioritises public safety over traditional notions of individual privacy. Ultimately, this article demonstrates that such surveillance in Sweden has been redefined and portrayed as a protective measure: a crucial instrument for safeguarding individual integrity in public spaces by preventing violent crimes. In this process, the very notion of individual integrity has been fundamentally reshaped.

Historically, Swedish policymakers have exercised caution regarding the implications of surveillance for democracy. Constitutional amendments in 2010 reinforced privacy as central to safeguarding freedom of opinion and democratic values. Government committees between 2004 and 2008 identified threats to privacy, prompting reforms that entrenched protections against unwarranted surveillance. In 2014, the Integrity Committee flagged advanced technologies such as facial recognition and drones as significant risks, and the 2017 report reaffirmed the importance of preserving personal integrity, despite growing concerns over public safety. Since then, however, police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces has increasingly been framed as a means of protecting personal integrity—now redefined as freedom from crime. The 2018 Camera Surveillance Act expanded police powers, authorising the use of so-called “integrity-enhancing” technologies, including automated masking and activation-triggered cameras. Policymakers argued that crime posed a greater threat to individual rights than surveillance itself, thereby redefining privacy in terms of safety in public spaces rather than freedom from state overreach.

Politicians have also drawn on fears of gun violence to justify legislative changes, framing expanded police-operated open-street CCTV surveillance as a necessary response to rising violence. In 2023, a surge in lethal gun violence led the Swedish government

to characterise the situation as “domestic terror” linked to “gang crime”, thereby justifying a national “camera offensive” strategy, implementing large-scale police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces. Political leaders now assert that this is compatible with personal integrity—marking a paradigm shift in Swedish crime policy, where such surveillance is seen as essential to safeguarding “ordinary citizens”, while “immigrants” are increasingly portrayed as security threats (cf. Schlarek Mulinari, 2024).

A further revision of the Swedish Camera Surveillance Act came into effect on 1 April 2025. With its implementation, the permit requirement for installing open-street CCTV cameras—whether by public or private sector actors—was abolished, while law enforcement agencies were granted broader powers to conduct CCTV surveillance in public spaces and deploy additional technologies. This substantial shift was arguably made possible by the reframing of personal integrity, which has played a pivotal role in enabling such reforms in a country where individual privacy and integrity remain constitutionally protected democratic principles. By presenting surveillance as a means of protecting individual integrity, the state has redefined the concepts of privacy, integrity and police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces to align with its political objectives. This transformation illustrates how constitutional norms, political strategies and public sentiment interact over time to facilitate the adoption of surveillance technologies even in historically resistant societies.

This shift carries tangible consequences. Police-managed CCTV surveillance disproportionately targets disadvantaged areas, raising concerns over social equity, even as public fear of crime drives popular support for these measures. It reflects a broader trend in Scandinavian and European crime policy, which increasingly prioritises public order and citizen protection over offender rehabilitation (Andersson, 2024; Lomell, 2014; Günther, 2013). The Swedish approach emphasises harsher sentencing and crime control through expanded and intensified police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces—risking the transformation of public spaces into “state spaces” (Goold, 2021). Historically regarded as communal arenas central to liberal democracy (Mitchell, 1995), public spaces are now increasingly subject to police-managed CCTV surveillance that may suppress political expression and discourage lawful public activity (Goold, 2021, p. 168), suggesting a departure from constitutional commitments to individual freedom.

Sweden’s obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights require the balancing of two duties: refraining from infringing individual rights and protecting individuals from violations by others. Rising public expectations of state protection have led policymakers in parts of Scandinavia, Europe and the United States to adopt measures promising prevention and safety (Günther, 2013; Lomell, 2014; Simon, 2007). However, police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces fails to deliver on these promises—the prevention of, and protection from, violent crime in public arenas. Evidence suggests that surveillance does not prevent or deter the serious and violent crimes that most fuel public anxiety (BRÅ, 2018; Gerell, 2021; Piza et al., 2018).

Moreover, such promises of protection fundamentally alter the expected role of the police, shifting from investigating past crimes to managing future risks (Lomell, 2014). These practices require trade-offs, often curtailing the liberties of some to protect the rights of others. Human rights, intended to safeguard all individuals, are particularly vital for those least likely to elicit empathy (Lomell, 2014). Yet intensified police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces risks undermining this principle by disproportionately targeting marginalised groups, deepening inequalities, and weakening social cohesion (Sætnan et al., 2004; Lomell, 2007). Governing through crime (Simon, 2007)—with a focus

on potential future offences rather than broader social welfare—has profound implications for democracy, often privileging security over inclusion and equity. Sweden's navigation of this paradigm shift will require reconciling the demand for public safety with enduring democratic principles and individual freedoms. This concern is not new: as Norris and Armstrong (1999, p. 230) warned, even in liberal democratic states, constitutional rights can be disregarded with ease. And while faith in a benevolent government may offer comfort in the present, it would be naïve to assume that such benevolence is guaranteed in the future.

Contrary to political promises, interviewed Swedish law enforcement personnel primarily expressed the hope that surveillance footage will aid post-crime investigations. This highlights the need for further research into how police-managed CCTV surveillance of public spaces is used in practice and raises the question of whether such use justifies the risks posed to personal privacy.

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Ethics approval

The project has received ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (decision no. 2023-02280-01).

Data availability statement

Governmental investigation reports are available here: [Statens offentliga utredningar - Sou.gov.se](https://statensoffentligautredningar.sou.gov.se). Both governmental investigation reports and legislative propositions are available here: lagrummet.se - [startsidea](https://startsidea.se). The qualitative interviews cannot be shared for confidentiality reasons.

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Governmental investigation reports and proposals

- Prop (2009/10:80). En reformerad grundlag [A reformed constitution].
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Televised press conferences and speeches

- Address to the Nation by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson regarding Serious Violence* [televised speech]. Stockholm, 28 September 2023.
- Address to the Public by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson at Almedalen Week* [speech]. Almedalen, 26 June 2024.
- Press Conference Following the National Security Council Meeting. Stockholm, 12 October 2023. Participants: Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, Deputy Prime Minister Ebba Busch, Minister for Labour Market and Integration Johan Pehrson, Minister for Justice Gunnar Strömmer.

Press Conference on New Measures Against Serious Organised Crime [press conference]. Stockholm, 3 October 2023. Participants: Minister of Justice Gunnar Strömmer (Moderates), Katja Nyberg (Sweden Democrats), Camilla Brodin (Christian Democrats), Martin Melin (Liberals).

Press Conference Related to the 2023 Camera Surveillance Inquiry. Stockholm, 15 April 2024. Participants: Minister of Justice Gunnar Strömmer and Special Investigator Peder Liljeqvist.