

Intolerance

Anti-Semitic, Homophobic, Islamophobic and
Xenophobic tendencies among the young

Summary, 2004

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Background

Intolerance towards minority groups – which may manifest itself in such forms as discrimination, harassment, insults, threats and physical violence – constitutes a serious social problem. In order to identify opportunities to combat intolerance, it is essential to possess knowledge about this phenomenon – its extent, character, geographical scope etc. Without such knowledge, there is a risk that any measures introduced will be misdirected. This survey, which has taken the form of a collaborative project between the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (*Brottsförebyggande rådet – BRÅ*) and the Living History Forum (*Forum för levande historia*), examines anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia and general intolerance among school youths in relation to attitudes, victimisation, self-reported crime and the dissemination of extremist propaganda.

Objective and research questions

The principal objective of the study has been to provide a picture of young people's attitudes on questions relating to Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, homophobia and xenophobia. The study has also focused on illuminating young people's exposure to, and levels of participation in, various forms of crime and antisocial behaviour associated with these phenomena.

The terms crime and antisocial behaviour refer to a broad spectrum of offensive behaviours, including everything from acts of violence against the person or vandalism to harassment and acts of discrimination. The study also estimates the extent of the dissemination of certain types of extreme nationalistic and racist propaganda.

The study investigates:

- What attitudes youths hold in relation to different minority groups and to immigrants in general.
- To what extent young people themselves report having been exposed to different types of offensive behaviour as a result of their origins or religious affiliations, or because they are perceived to be homosexual.
- To what extent young people participate in different forms of offensive behaviour as a result of another's origins, religion or homosexuality.
- Whether there is a correlation between intolerance and social background factors.

10,600 students completed the questionnaire

The study is based on a comprehensive questionnaire survey of school youths in years eight and nine (the final two years of secondary school), and in years one, two and three of further education (sixth-form level) programmes. A random sample was drawn from among all Swedish school pupils in the relevant age-groups. The sampling units comprised classes within the secondary school system and, at the further education level, further education

programmes distributed over colleges of further education. Each class included in the sample was given a set of questionnaires, which the students then completed during lesson time. The questionnaires were completed anonymously. Of a total of 672 classes included in the sample, completed questionnaires were received from 606. The final response frequency at the level of the individual lies at 76.2 per cent, when the students in those classes that did not participate in the study are included among the non-response. Among the classes that did participate, the final response frequency at the individual level amounted to 82 per cent. The material finally comprised questionnaires from a total of 10,600 students.

The non-response was somewhat greater among the respondents in further education than it was among those in the secondary school system, and first and foremost among students on vocational, individual and specially formulated study programmes, which together produced a non-response of 31.6 per cent at the individual level. This may contribute to a certain underestimation of the proportion of young people with intolerant attitudes.

Measures of intolerant attitudes, victimisation, and participation

The point of departure adopted in relation to the study's attempts to measure anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, homophobic and xenophobic tendencies among young people focused on the various forms of expression taken by group-focused intolerance, which in many respects appear to manifest themselves in similar ways. These include distrust and suspicion directed at an entire group as a collective, powerful dislike and repudiation and a willingness to take or support measures that discriminate against individuals belonging to the relevant group or category.

The questionnaire included a relatively large number of questions with fixed answer options that relate to attitudes towards different minority groups in Sweden. The questions are often posed in the form of statements which the student then responds to by signifying the extent to which he or she agrees or does not agree with a given statement. To take a few examples: "Muslims in Sweden should have the right to build mosques"; "It would be completely okay to live next door to a responsible Muslim person"; "There are far too many Muslims in Sweden", and so forth.

Corresponding questions were asked in the form of items relating to Jews and homosexuals respectively. There are clear reciprocal correlations between the answers to the individual questions. *Attitude scales relating to attitudes towards the different groups* were constructed on the basis of the respondents' answers. These scales take the form of mean indexes and have a range from zero to four. High scores indicate that an individual agrees with negatively charged statements and repudiates those that are positively charged.

Since the correlations between the attitude scales relating to Muslims, Jews and homosexuals respectively were relatively strong, an *index of general intolerance towards these groups* was

also created by combining the original subscales. The questionnaire also included a number of questions focusing on attitudes towards immigrants, which were used to create other indexes.

As a result of the study's theme, it is inevitable that certain of the statements and questions included in the questionnaire may be perceived as provocative. The inclusion of such items was necessary in order to elicit a response and to ensure that the respondents would adopt a position that reflected their attitudes. At the same time, it should be noted that a large proportion of the statements contain positively charged formulations, which were included *inter alia* in order to avoid a concentration of negatively charged assertions relating to various groups.

In addition, questions were posed relating to exposure to, and participation in, various forms of antisocial behaviour associated with background characteristics. It is important to point out that these items were constructed in order to measure events that, on the basis of the student's *own* interpretation and assessment, occurred as a result of the respondent's or the victim's background, religion or perceived homosexuality, e.g. having been insulted because others perceived one as homosexual.

Results

the majority of students profess positive attitudes towards different minority groups

The findings from the study indicate that the vast majority of youths profess a positive attitude towards the different minority groups. The young people included in this study tend for example to agree with statements that most Muslims (or Jews or homosexuals) are undoubtedly "good people" whereas they tend to distance themselves from negatively charged statements. The scale mean on the combined general intolerance index against Muslims, Jews and homosexuals lies at a score of approximately one (with the scale assuming a maximum value of four). The corresponding score on the three subscales varies only slightly around this value (from 0.9 in relation to homosexuals to 1.2 in relation to Muslims).

The proportion of youths with a *predominantly positive attitude*, as manifested in low scores (<1.5) on the index, was found to be: 66 per cent in relation to attitudes towards Muslims; 68 per cent in relation to Jews and 74 per cent on the index relating to homosexuals. The corresponding proportion on the combined general intolerance index was noted at 72 per cent. In total, then, the responses of slightly over seven of ten young people expressed positively charged values.

The proportion presenting *high levels of intolerance*, as manifested in high scores (>2.5) on the indexes, was found to be approximately eight per cent on the index relating to attitudes towards Muslims, six per cent in relation to Jews, and seven per cent in relation to homosexuals. The corresponding proportion on the combined general intolerance scale was

five per cent. Thus a total of one in twenty young people expressed a predominantly negative attitude. The proportion of students expressing a strong antipathy (>3 on the index) was smaller, comprising 1.7 per cent of the respondents.

A group was also identified that may be designated as more or less "undecided" or ambivalent in their attitude. In relation to the general intolerance index, this group comprises approximately 24 per cent of the youths surveyed. The size of this group is roughly the same in relation to the various subscales focusing on the respondents' attitude to the different minority groups.

Attitudes towards immigrants and immigration were measured by means of a number of attitude statements such as: "Sweden should continue to accept refugees." Approximately twelve per cent of the respondents strongly disagreed with this statement. Another statement read: "Immigrants in Sweden who come from countries outside Europe should go back to their native countries." The proportion who agreed completely with this statement was of the same magnitude as in the previous example (approximately ten per cent). Similarly, approximately ten per cent answered that they thought it would be "completely okay" or "fairly okay" if a friend of theirs "wrote 'stop immigration' on a wall in town in the form of graffiti." Young people who expressed a negative attitude towards immigration tended also to have negative attitudes towards Muslims, Jews and homosexuals.

Girls are less intolerant than boys

There is a distinctive pattern of sex differences in the attitudes professed towards the different groups. Girls tended on the whole to have a more positive attitude than boys. The overriding pattern found among the boys was that, in round figures, slightly over 60 per cent expressed a predominantly positive attitude whereas approximately ten per cent expressed a high degree of intolerance. Among the girls, 82 per cent may be defined as having a positive general attitude in relation to the minorities named in the questionnaire, and two per cent may be characterised as intolerant. The variation across the attitude scales relating to the different groups is somewhat greater for the girls than it is for the boys. The greatest difference between boys and girls was noted in relation to their view of homosexuals, where almost nine of ten girls expressed a positive attitude, as compared to six of ten boys.

Age differences are slight

There is a certain tendency for older students to profess positive attitudes more often than their younger counterparts. In relation to the combined general tolerance scale, the proportion with a predominantly positive attitude was lowest in year eight of secondary school (68 per cent) and highest in year three of further education programmes (78 per cent).

Differences in attitudes by school programme

The proportion of further education students professing an intolerant attitude towards Muslims, Jews and homosexuals was highest among students who were not reading theoretical, higher education foundation programmes and this pattern was particularly distinctive among the boys. The most positive attitudes were found among girls in further education reading theoretical foundation programmes. The proportion of girls enrolled in such programmes that professed a generally intolerant attitude towards the minorities named in the survey was found to be 0.1 per cent, by comparison with eleven per cent professing generally intolerant attitudes among the boys enrolled in other forms of further education programme.

Country of origin and religious background have a certain significance

Students with a completely Swedish background (i.e. those born in Sweden to two Swedish-born parents) tended to profess an intolerant attitude towards Muslims somewhat more often than students with an immigrant background (i.e. students born abroad to parents also born outside Sweden). Of the former group, approximately nine per cent may be classified as "intolerant" (having scores of over 2.5 on the index) as compared with 1.5 per cent of the latter group. The reverse relationship is found in relation to attitudes towards homosexuals, where students with an immigrant background more often assumed a more guarded position. Approximately twelve per cent may be classified as intolerant by comparison with approximately six per cent of students with a completely Swedish background. As regards attitudes towards Jews, there were no differences between students from an immigrant background and those from a completely Swedish background respectively (with approximately six per cent of both groups professing intolerance).

The small group (1.7 per cent of all students) who were found to be *highly* intolerant (with scores of over three on the scale) towards all three minority groups, Muslims, Jews and homosexuals, was almost exclusively comprised of students born in Sweden (99.5 per cent).

The large group of students who did not report having any religious affiliation (approximately 40 per cent of the sample as a whole) tended to express intolerant opinions as regards their general attitude towards the different minority groups somewhat more often than other students (approximately seven per cent of those reporting no religious affiliation, by comparison with approximately five per cent of the total sample). As regards attitudes specifically towards Jews, the level of intolerance within the group reporting no religious affiliation was roughly the same as that among those reporting themselves to be Muslims (with approximately eight per cent of both groups professing intolerance).

Dissemination of extremist propaganda more common among intolerant youths

Approximately seven per cent of the students reported that they had come into contact with material produced by certain race-ideological and extreme nationalist organisations. The National Socialist Front (*Nationalsocialistisk Front*) was the most commonly reported

organisation in this context. Of the students designated as generally intolerant towards the minority groups included in the survey, approximately 30 per cent reported having come into contact with an organisation of this kind, by comparison with six per cent among those professing a positive attitude.

Since 1997, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of racist websites. In the current study, seven per cent of students reported having visited a racist website or one with a hostile attitude towards immigrants. Among those professing a positive attitude towards the minority groups mentioned in the study, slightly over two per cent had visited such a website, as compared with 38 per cent of those designated as intolerant.

The race-ideological underground movement often employs music as a means of channelling its message to an audience. Fifteen per cent of the students included in the survey reported having listened to so-called white-power music on at least one occasion. Comparisons with an earlier study indicate that there may have been an increase in this regard within certain groups. In 1997, approximately nineteen per cent of boys enrolled in practical programmes reported having listened to this type of music at least once, as compared to approximately 25 per cent of boys enrolled in vocational programmes in the current study.

Proportion of those not at all sure the holocaust actually happened has declined somewhat

In the earlier survey conducted in 1997, an item was included with the intention of measuring how sure the students were that the Holocaust had taken place. The question posed was worded as follows: "The term 'the Holocaust' is usually used to refer to the Nazis' murder of approximately six million Jews during the Second World War. How sure are you that 'the Holocaust' took place?".

The question was criticised, primarily because of the specification of the number of Jews who fell victim to the Holocaust, since it was felt that the inclusion of this figure might contribute to the level of uncertainty among the respondents. A pilot study conducted prior to the present survey therefore tested three alternatively formulated questions all of which excluded information on the number of victims. These were tested against the original formulation with the result being that no substantial differences were noted in the response frequencies across the different formulations.

The original question was therefore also included in the current survey. Even though there are certain comparability problems, the results indicate two tendencies. One is that the proportion reporting themselves to be "completely certain" has diminished somewhat since the 1997 study. In the current survey, 67 per cent reported that they were completely certain, as compared to 71 per cent in the 1997 study. The other tendency noted was that the proportion who were "not at all sure", i.e. the group who were most uncertain, has decreased. The proportion reporting that they were not at all sure in 1997 lay at 4.1 per cent, as

compared with 2.0 per cent in the current survey. In total, the structure of the distribution of responses is very similar across the two surveys (with approximately 85 per cent and 83 per cent respectively reporting themselves to be either completely certain or fairly certain).

In both surveys, the students were asked to specify their attitudes to the statement that "There is too much talk about Nazism and the extermination of the Jews." The tendency here is such that the proportion of students who agree with this statement has increased at the same time as the number who do not agree with it has diminished. The results from both surveys indicate that it is the students who are unsure that the Holocaust actually took place that feel that there is too much talk about Nazism and the extermination of the Jews.

40 per cent of foreign born students have been insulted at some point as a result of their origins

The most common form of victimisation relates to verbal insults. Approximately fourteen per cent of the students reported having been insulted at least once over the course of the previous twelve months as a result of their Swedish or foreign origins. The corresponding proportion that had been threatened stood at six per cent. The proportion of respondents reporting they had been exposed to assault as a result of their origins stood at 2.6 per cent. Questions were also asked as to whether the respondents had experienced various events as a result of their religion. A total of approximately four per cent reported having been insulted, 1.7 per cent reported they had been frozen out (or 'sent to Coventry'), 0.9 per cent that they had been threatened, and 0.5 per cent reported that they had been hit because of their religion.

One pattern that was found consistently in relation to these forms of victimisation was that they were more common among foreign born students whose parents were also born abroad than they were among students with a completely Swedish background. To take one or two concrete examples, approximately 40 per cent of the students with an immigrant background of this kind reported that they had been insulted as a result of their origins at some point as compared with nine per cent of the youths from a completely Swedish background. Of the students with an immigrant background, 31 per cent reported having had someone shout racist/xenophobic abuse at them whereas fourteen per cent of students with a completely Swedish background reported having been subject to similar abuses linked to their Swedish background. It was also more common for students with an immigrant background (46 per cent) to perceive themselves as having been subject to unfair treatment at some point during the previous twelve months by someone (e.g. a person in authority) than it was for students with a completely Swedish background (nine per cent). Slightly over six per cent (6.6 per cent) of students with an immigrant background reported that they had been hit over the course of the previous year as a result of their origins, and fifteen per cent that they had been threatened.

Students with experience of victimisation reported that they had recently experienced negative feelings (felt “down and depressed”, angry, worried, or had difficulty sleeping) more often than those who did not report experience of victimisation.

As regards the issue of whether students had been exposed to various acts as a result of others perceiving them as homosexual, these questions were only posed among the students in further education. Of these, a total of 2.1 per cent reported having been victimised in some way as a result of others believing them to be homosexual. It was most common to have been insulted (1.9 per cent) whilst it was more uncommon to have been threatened (0.2 per cent) or hit (0.3 per cent).

1.5 per cent reported having hit someone as a result of their foreign background

The questionnaire included questions both on participation in various forms of antisocial behaviour in general, and on behaviours of this kind that were linked to different aspects of the victim’s background. As regards general participation, 33 per cent of the students reported having insulted someone so that they became “angry or upset” at some point during the previous twelve months. Approximately 30 per cent reported that they had either threatened someone so that he or she, in the judgement of the student, became scared, or hit someone sufficiently hard to cause them pain.

Approximately eight per cent reported that they had insulted someone “because of their foreign origins” over the course of the previous twelve months. The corresponding proportion for having threatened someone was 1.7 per cent, whilst 1.5 per cent reported having hit someone because of their foreign background.

As regards a Swedish background as a motivating factor, 2.6 per cent reported having insulted someone, whilst 0.7 per cent had threatened someone and 0.6 per cent reported having hit someone because of the person’s Swedish background.

With regard to the question of religion, approximately four per cent reported that they had insulted someone as a result of their religion whereas the proportions who had threatened someone (0.8 per cent) or hit someone (0.6 per cent) were lower. The pattern is similar in relation to the question of whether respondents had done something to someone as a result of their being homosexual: approximately five per cent reported having insulted someone, whereas 1.3 per cent had threatened someone and 0.8 per cent reported having hit someone for this reason.

The students were also asked whether they had committed any of a number of acts against someone “as a result of their foreign origins, religion, or skin colour”: frozen someone out, spread lies about, spoken ill of, started a row with or shoved someone, or destroyed something. A total of thirteen per cent reported having committed one of these acts during

the previous twelve months. The most common act reported was having “spoken ill of” someone (approximately ten per cent) and having “started a row” (five per cent).

A clear correlation between intolerance and participation in antisocial behaviour

A strong link emerged in the study between the degree of general intolerance towards Muslims, Jews and homosexuals and participation in various forms of antisocial behaviour that were directed against a person as a result of their foreign background, religion or homosexuality. This pattern was also found in relation to the indexes focusing on attitudes expressing hostility towards immigrants. The higher the level of intolerance, the more common it was to have insulted, threatened or hit someone.

This pattern was found both among behaviours of this kind in general, and also in relation to theft offences for example. The strongest correlations however were found in relation to behaviours that according to the youths had been motivated by various aspects of the victim's background. These correlations were found among both boys and girls.

It was most uncommon for those students who profess the most positive attitudes towards Jews, Muslims and homosexuals, to have reported having threatened or hit someone as a result of their foreign background or religion (0.1 per cent), whereas this was considerably more common within the small group of students professing the most intolerant attitudes (36.8 per cent). If the supposed homosexuality of the victim is added to the motivating factors, together with a foreign background and religion, the corresponding figures are as follows: 0.3 per cent among the group with the most positive attitudes report having threatened or hit someone at some point, as compared with 41.2 per cent of the most intolerant group of students.

According to a rough estimate, the twelve per cent of students with the highest scores on the measure of general intolerance account for almost three-quarters of the total number of acts of threats and violence that are reported to be linked to the victims foreign background, religion or sexuality.

Intolerance is associated with amongst other things school failure

One of the study's initial assumptions was that levels of intolerance are not randomly distributed among young people. The findings confirm this assumption. Systematic differences were found in several different areas between the youths reporting a low level of intolerance and those who are highly intolerant.

A high level of intolerance tends to be associated to some extent with

- low levels of educational achievement and social class among parents
- certain individual level and emotional factors such as restlessness, aggressiveness and a lack of empathy (but not nervous problems)

- poor school performance and adjustment to school
- certain types of problematic family situation such as low levels of parental knowledge as to the youths socialisation patterns
- stereotypical gender norms (male chauvinist attitudes)
- feelings of social exclusion
- frequently associating with friends during the evening, often in a group, and also associating with a couple of older friends more often than the average.

Drinking alcohol and partying are more common among those professing intolerant attitudes by comparison with young people in general. There is a strong correlation between intolerance and perceptions of friends' attitudes on the question of hostility towards immigrants. The correlation between listening to white-power music and manifesting an intolerant attitude is similarly strong. The same is also true in relation to preferences for political parties with an extreme nationalist focus. These findings were noted among both boys and girls at both the secondary school and further education level.

These findings correspond relatively well with the picture of intolerant and xenophobic youth presented in studies that have employed other methods to study the characteristics and conditions associated with such young people. Nor do they contradict the idea that certain conditions, among which school failure assumes a relatively central position, constitute part of a process that involves youths tending to become more receptive to extreme nationalistic and xenophobic opinions. For certain youths who find it difficult in school or who have other kinds of problems, adopting the specific style and the opinions found in xenophobic groups may constitute an alternative means of acquiring status and creating an identity. This does not exclude the possibility that the xenophobic and racist underground culture may for various reasons exercise such a strong attraction for other youths, who do not suffer from problems of this kind, that they are drawn towards it.

The risk factors associated with intolerance are the same as those linked to crime

Several of the factors that were found in this study to be linked to high levels of intolerance have in other contexts often been described as risk factors for delinquent behaviour in the criminological literature. These results suggest that even if one succeeded in reducing the prevalence of highly intolerant young people, this would be likely to produce only a very limited reduction in the total level of participation in crime and antisocial behaviour among young people. Youth crime is a much larger and more far-reaching problem and is far from being limited to young people with xenophobic or otherwise highly intolerant opinions, even if this latter group appears to be more actively involved in crime than young people in general.

Important to influence attitudes

Crimes of the kind discussed here, and which constitute part of what are usually referred to as hate crimes, constitute an important social problem in themselves however. In addition to a large number of other measures – on the part of the anti-crime agencies, for example –

efforts to affect attitudes constitute an important aspect of the work to combat this form of crime. It is particularly important to reduce the recruitment of young people into the group professing highly intolerant attitudes. At the same time however, the results suggest that the characteristics and conditions shared by a large number of these youths, and which they utilise to distinguish themselves from others, also happen to be factors that may constitute an obstacle to attitudinal change. It is possible that it might be simpler to attempt to persuade the youths located in the grey area between tolerance and intolerance to shift in the direction of a more tolerant attitude.

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