



# Fear of crime research in Sweden

## – a research discourse in beneficial soil

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### 1. Introduction

»We haven't been this *otrygga* for ten years« states the second largest party in Sweden, the Moderates (Moderaterna, 2018). Not to be outdone, Stefan Löfven argues for extensive interventions to make the Swedes feel more »trygga«; suggesting longer sentences for young offenders, increased surveillance and more resources for the police. Perhaps the police could co-operate with the military in order to fight gang crime, suggests Löfven, leader of the Socialdemocrats (2018). The background to these statements is the ongoing election cycle of 2018, in which the Social Democrats and the Moderates are struggling for the chance to form government and rule Sweden. The election is characterized by statements concerning how »otrygga« the Swedish people are; »it's a crisis«, according to the Moderates (2018). The word they are using, »trygghet«, and its negation »otrygghet«, have by that point in time reached a saliency in Swedish political debate that is remarkable. There is no shortage of measurements of Swedish people's »o/trygghet«,<sup>2</sup> at the time of the 2018 election. »O/trygghet« is measured using quantitative surveys or structured interviews by at least five national governmental agencies, at both the regional and municipal level of local government, and by private enterprises across different geographic contexts in Sweden. The Crime Survey of Sweden, administered by the Swedish Crime Council, claims to be the largest in the world in terms of participants; the survey is sent to over 200 000 people (BRÅ, 2020).

I argue this; two candidates for premier minister of Sweden trying to outdo each other in concern for Swedish »o/trygghet« represents an intersection of several strands of historical development. One of these is birth of the concept of fear of crime, and the subsequent establishment of an expansive research discourse in the United States. Work on my dissertation began by mapping out this research discourse; tracing methodological and theoretical assumptions and conventions to their original studies, and trying to understand the criminological, social and political milieu in the American 1960s, in which they originated. Tracing this research discourse through periods of methodological invention in the 70's, and of rapid expansion in the 80's, I aim to pay attention

1. Work on this dissertation project began in 2016, and defense of the thesis took place 17/12 2021.
2. »O/trygghet« is used in this dissertation to denote both »Trygghet« and its negation »Otrygghet«.



to the conjunction; how the establishment of a fear of crime research discourse intersects with other strands of social development.

My dissertation investigates several empirical materials, in order to understand and explain the saliency and meaning of the concept of »o/trygghet« in contemporary Sweden, aiming to create a historical account of this development that is rich, interwoven and pays attention to detail. This ambition led me to engage with Hall et al. (2013/1978) analysis of the British mugging panic in relation to the economic crisis of the 70s. Their analysis of the crisis depicts a shift from a consensual to a coercive management style in the post-crisis Britain of the 70's, and there are many striking parallels with how crime and law has risen to prominence during late modernity.<sup>3</sup> Late modernity should arguably be understood as a period of rapid structural and social change. Seemingly paradoxical lines of development have taken place during it, in terms of stable or decreasing levels of crime coinciding with a rapid expansion of the judicial sphere. Concurring with this is the transformation of global capitalism into its current neo-liberal form (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005), during which Sweden has experienced increased economic inequality and experimented with new forms of governance of its welfare sector (Therborn, 2020). These strands of historical change function as a background to the establishment of the central subject of research, the fear of crime discourse in Sweden.

The fear of crime discourse was brought to Sweden first through the addition of an indicator in the Survey of Living Conditions (Undersökningen om Levnadsförhållanden) in 1987, and then through more specialized research during the 90's (Torstensson & Olander, 1999; Torstensson & Persson, 2000; Torstensson, Wikström, & Olander, 1998; Wikström, 1991; Wikström & Dolmén, 1997; Wikström & Torstensson, 1998; Wikström, Torstensson, & Dolmén, 1997; Wikström, Torstensson, & Dolmén, 1997). Fear of crime, the subject of the research, was translated into Swedish as »o/trygghet«. I analyze this in terms of the instruments of research; the surveys, their American origins and how they were translated into Swedish, and by interviewing key actors. A survey, emails and phone conversations are used to study how Swedish municipalities measure fear of crime.

What happened to the word »o/trygghet« when it was designated as the Swedish translation of the American concept fear of crime? A parallel strand of empirical study investigates this through an analysis of conceptual change, comparing how »o/trygghet« is used by the Social Democrats and the Moderates in motions and bills from the Swedish Riksdag across five time periods: 1978, 1988, 1998, 2008 and 2018. This part of the dissertation is theoretically inspired by the German conceptual historian Reinhardt Koselleck, whom claims that periods of historical change and upheaval are also periods of conceptual and semantic transformation (Koselleck, 2004).

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3. Late modernity is defined as the period of time beginning in the late 70's and still ongoing at the time of writing according to most definitions (Beck, 1992a, 1992b; Giddens, 1991; Mulinari & Sandell, 2009; Sennett, 2007)

## 2. Rationale behind the research

The dissertation's starting point was an epistemological interest in how production of scientific and criminological knowledge, its dissemination into common understanding of crime and the historical and social context in which it was produced, intersects and can be understood in relation to each other. Do how we research change how we think and talk about crime? A purpose of the dissertation is to analyze how fear of crime measurements and the concept of »otrygghet« fits into the construction of a *common sense of crime*. What is the political function of this knowledge? What is used to argue for? As such, this dissertation is theoretically oriented towards an interest in the intersection of power and knowledge, and how it can be located in contemporary political debate. It is also an effort towards historicizing the sociological and criminological development that this thesis depicts; a matter of *conjuncture* (Gilbert, 2019; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 2013/1978). A key purpose is to construct a historical account of how the establishment of fear of crime research fits into the developing political narrative of crime. Mapping out the conjuncture for Stuart Hall was a matter of situating current developments historically (Gilbert, 2019; Hall et al., 2013/1978). There are several strands of criminological development that coincides with the establishment of fear of crime research in late modernity. They are neither caused by, nor causes of this establishment, but rather interlock and connect; are *conjunctive*. Three overarching research questions has guided this project:

- How has fear of crime been researched in Sweden, and how did the research discourse emerge, expand and establish?
- How has use of the concept of »otrygghet« in political debate changed during the examined period of 1978-2018?
- How can the expansion of fear or crime research, and the saliency of the concept of »otrygghet« be understood in relation contemporary Swedish politics and society

Figure 1

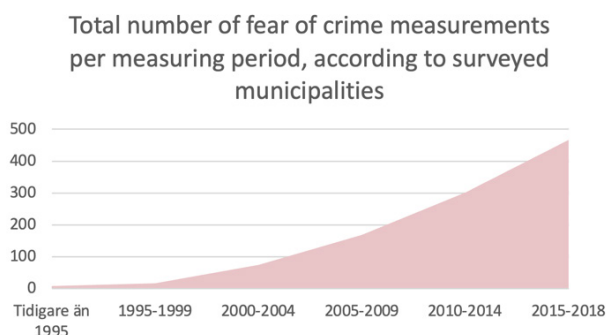


Figure 2

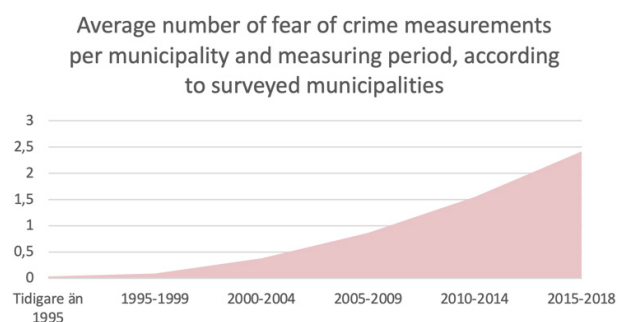




Figure 3

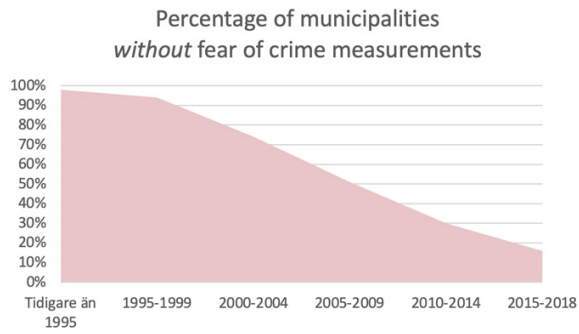


Figure 4

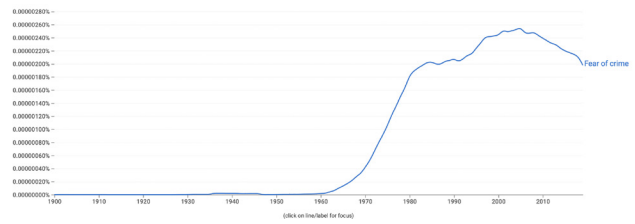
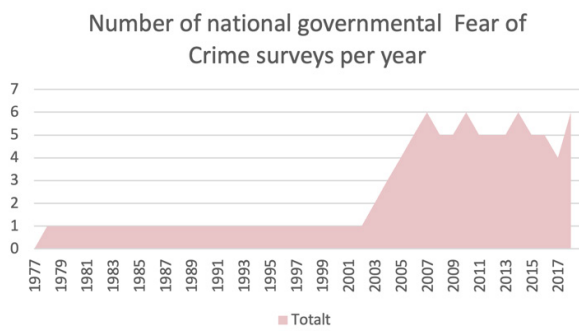


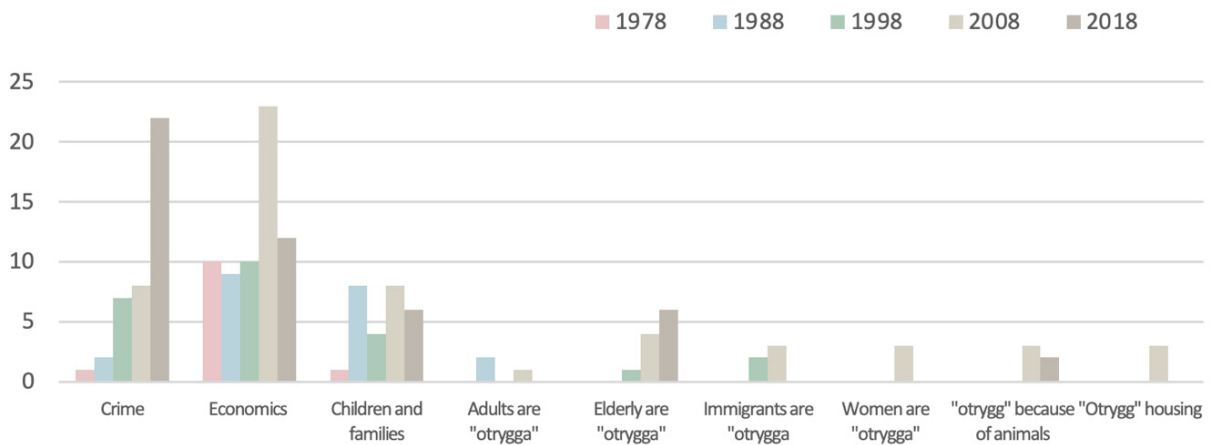
Figure 5



»Fear of Crime« according to Google Ngram

Figure 6

"Otrygg" 1978-2018





### 3. Emergence and expansion of the Swedish fear of crime research discourse

I use document analysis, a survey of Swedish municipalities and key informant interviews to chart and describe the emergence and establishment of a fear of crime research discourse in Sweden. Figure 1 depicts development of total number of survey participations in municipalities over time, based on the municipality survey that forms part of the empirical material of this analysis.<sup>4</sup> Ranging from 1995 to 2018, we can see an exponential increase, from almost zero survey measurements, to almost 500 surveys in the Swedish municipalities during the last period. Figure 2 depicts the average number of fear of crime measurements per municipality. This also increases exponentially during the period 1995-2018. Figure 3 depicts the percentage of municipalities without measurements of fear of crime. This graph shows a similar tendency compared to previous figures; very few municipalities did fear of crime measurements during the earlier periods, but only 16% said they don't measure fear of crime during the last period of 2015-2018.

Figure 1, 2 and 3 depict a development of fear of crime measurements during the 2000s that must be described as rapid and striking. While the accumulation of fear of crime surveys begins during the 90's in the municipalities, and in 1978 in terms of national fear of crime surveys, the period of most rapid development takes place during the 2000's.

Figure 5 illustrates the establishment of national fear of crime surveys over time; The Survey of Living Conditions in 1978, Local Youth Politics Survey in 2003, The National Public Health survey in 2004, The Citizen Survey in 2005, The Swedish Crime Survey in 2006 and The Swedish Contingencies Agency Survey in 2007. Most of them don't have fear of crime as a main theme, but they all contain fear of crime indicators. From 2003 to 2007, the number of national surveys containing fear of crime indicators thus grow from one to six. For the municipalities, the period with the most dramatic increase in fear of

4. The survey contains questions on if municipalities participate in a number of national elective surveys and if they are doing local fear of crime surveys of different types. It also contains questions on when they started doing each survey and if implementation has been continual. The response alternatives are six time periods; before 1995, 1995-1999, 2000-2004, 2005-2009, 2010-2014 and 2014-2018 (the survey collected data in 2018). For the data in this graph, survey implementation and participation has been added together for each time period per municipality. For example, if a municipality started doing one survey in 2000-2004 and another in 2010-2014 and a third in 2015-2018, they would get 0 for before 1995, 0 for 1995-1999, 1 for 2000-2004, 1 for 2005-2009, 2 for 2010-2014 and 3 for 2014-2018. If a municipality say they have started doing a survey in a time period but have not participated in that survey continually, the survey has been counted for that specific time period but not for consecutive time periods. The theoretical max is the numbers of fear of crime surveys and survey types in the municipality survey, times the participating municipalities;  $9 \cdot 194 = 1746$ . »No« and »Don't know« have both been coded as 0, so the count of surveys errs on the conservative side.



crime measurements is later, in the 2010's, even though the development was well underway in the 00's. 89% of participating municipalities said they also do some form of non-quantitative measurement of fear of crime. Two forms of self-defined non-quantitative measurements of fear of crime emerged as very common: fear of crime walks (»trygghetsvandringar«) and citizen dialogues (»medborgardialoger«).

#### 4. The concept of »otrygghet«

The last of the empirical chapters of this dissertation dealt with changes in political rhetoric of what »otrygghet« signifies over the period of 1978-2018. This analysis of conceptual change, methodologically inspired by the conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck, found significant changes in what »otrygghet« signifies; »otrygghet« had during the most recent period of 2018 come to be used almost exclusively in a crime context. The categorization of context is illustrated by figure 6.<sup>5</sup> The concept »otrygghet« in the earlier periods was used in a variety of contexts, most commonly denoting unpredictability in the economic sense; you were »otrygg« if your employment, housing, or availability of social resources and welfare was unsafe. In the examined empirical material from 1978, the suggested causes of otrygghet include right-wing indecisiveness, over-reliance on oil, generally formulated laws, staff reductions and far-reaching rationalizations in various organizations, even expenditures for roads that have not kept up with costs, and uneven felling operations. Suggested solutions are oriented towards stability and control; empirical examples include better continuity, the elimination of housing slums, overcrowding and housing shortages, nationalization of education, even timber extraction and coordinated state research and legislation on toxic substances. The difference between the examples from 1978, and the last period of 2018 is stark. According to the empirical examples from 2018, the causes of otrygghet are violence, crime and drugs, shootings, the presence of drugs in school, fraud against the elderly, gang crime, organized crime, gang crime, robbery, shoplifting, burglary in small rural communities and thefts from the elderly in their homes and the absence of police. Suggested solutions to solve the problem of otrygghet are oriented also in a single direction: efficient police, more security cameras, a strong and continuous police presence, facilitate the police's crime-solving work, bans for people who create insecurity, CCTV, further sharpened penalties, better conditions and salaries for the police, as well as a series of stricter

5. The figure shows categorization of all examined examples according to context. It should be noted that the chart shows total number of examples, and not averages. This means that there are far more examples from the last periods compared to the earlier periods, and how common a context is should be interpreted accordingly. For examples does the economic context dominate in 1978, even though more examples can be found from 2008 in the economic context.



penalties and new criminalizations. The suggested solutions are singularly oriented towards increased police and penal control.

## 5. Discussion

Koselleck writes that concepts are joints linking language to the historical, social and political extralinguistic world; words with special ability to carry meaning. Words can be unambiguous in use, but concepts must always be interpreted, their baggage investigated (2004). I argue that the translation of fear of crime into the Swedish word »otrygghet« gave this word a new and particular baggage. The new content of the concept »otrygghet« is evident in statements like »one out of three women feel »otrygga« in their own neighborhood after dark« (Motion 2018/19:2806), »this type of crime risk spreading »otrygghet« and cause many elderly from refraining from leaving their homes« (Motion 2018/19:2806). A research discourse is, in the way that I have used this term, made up of set ideas and practices of how knowledge on a subject should be produced and interpreted. What was imported into a Swedish context, was a discourse on how fear of crime knowledge is to be constructed in a way that is considered empirically valid, with inherent theoretical assumptions on crime, fear of crime and the causes of crime, largely derived from Signs of Disorder, or Broken Windows theory.

Crime in Sweden isn't increasing, and have not done so for 20-30 years (Andersson & Nilsson, 2009; Kivivuori, 2014; Nilsson, Estrada, & Bäckman, 2017; H Tham, 2018; H. Tham & von Hofer, 2014; Tonry, 2014; von Hofer & Tham, 1989). Simultaneously, Sweden experienced rapid expansion of the judicial sphere, and increasing economic inequality. This is the contextual background to the establishment and expansion of fear of crime research. I argue fear of crime surveys fulfill a unique role in seemingly resolving this paradox. If people are fearful, further interventions in terms of police control and surveillance can be constructed as legitimate. If that fear can be quantified, can be defined in scientific terms, the need for interventions is not a point of view and thus possible to critique ideologically, but an empirically supported *fact*. Fear of crime surveys remove the issue of »crime« from official crime statistics and other estimates of crime levels. Even if crime is not increasing, can the argument be made that people are »otrygga«, and that can be used to legitimate further judicial expansion. It is a key result of the analysis: as official crime statistics don't show increasing levels of crime that would lend themselves to constructing arguments for control-related interventions, the argumentation shifts to two new forms: using fear of crime survey results and arguing that any crime is too much crime. One of the dissertations conclusions is that fear of crime research must show that people are »otrygga«. I argue that knowledge produced by the research



discourse has very limited potential to improve people's lives, in terms of making them feel or be safer, and this is the case by limit of design.

If the purpose of fear of crime research is to reduce fear of crime, then the usefulness of the knowledge produced cannot explain the spread of the research discourse. The speed and intensity of the expansion of fear of crime research, and how it managed to penetrate and expand into many segments of Swedish governance, must be considered remarkable. There is a Swedish idiom »att falla i god jord«, that would translate to »to end up in beneficial soil«. The strands of social and historical change analyzed here is far too complex to discuss in causal terms. Fear of crime research, and its impressive proliferation cannot be attributed to any one factor. Neither do I make the argument that conceptual change of the word »otrygghet« was exclusively caused by the establishment of fear of crime surveys. In agreement with Koselleck, the relationship between the structural, social and historical, and the linguistic, conceptual and semantic is better characterized by mutual tension, and as potentially explosive than causal. Sometimes, things end up in beneficial soil. The economic restructuring of late modernity neo-liberal capitalism has created a lot of instability inherent in the system. Christie (2016) succinctly summarizes the function of the judicial system in relation to this instability:

*Wealth everywhere is unequally distributed. So is access for paid work. Both problems contain potentialities for unrest. The crime control industry is suited for coping with both. (Christie, 2016, p. 1).*

The state thus requires more instruments of order maintenance and control. Several works in Swedish criminology have also emphasized the need to understand late modern penal politics in terms of its relation to the declining welfare state (Demker & Duus-Otterström, 2009; Estrada & Nilsson, 2001; Gallo & Svensson, 2019; Tham, 2019). The fear of crime research discourse produce knowledge suitable for legitimating said increases of control and order maintenance. It generates scientific knowledge that is a *good fit* for late modern penal politics. It frames the social issue in question, »otrygghet«, according to an understanding that defines it as related to crime, and proposes solutions derived from an understanding of crime as a problem of order maintenance. Constructing crime as a threat coming from below, and a matter of order maintenance omits a structural understanding of the causes of crime, and a structural critique of the current order. The establishment of a new hegemonic conflict in society, between the criminal and the law-abiding, is central to understanding the discourse on crime in late modernity which, in the Swedish context, is alarmist, doom-laden, and emotionally charged (Andersson & Nilsson, 2009; Hermansson, 2019; H Tham, 2018), and simultaneously strangely de-politicized. The consensual position of understanding crime as a matter of control, means that crime cannot have material cause (Hall et al., 2013/1978). The research discourse's ability to simplify should be





understood as a feature, not a flaw. It consists of the ability to conceal the political and ideological behind the cool detachment of statistics:

*Statistics – whether crime rates or opinion polls – have an ideological function: they appear to ground free floating and controversial in the hard, incontrovertible soil of numbers. (Hall et al., 2013/1978, p. 13)*

Kontaktoplysninger

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