

A police officer stands guard in Stockholm. AFP PHOTO/JONATHAN NACKSTRAND (Photo credit should read JONATHAN NACKSTRAND/AFP via Getty Images)



Analysis

Sweden's migrant rape crisis

European liberals never ask uncomfortable questions about immigration

BY **AYAAN HIRSI ALI**



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Was the 2015 European migration crisis followed by a surge in sex crime and sexual harassment? It's a delicate question; one that many people would prefer not to be asked, much less answered.

But as a result of this collective reticence, discussion surrounding this issue has often been isolated to two extremes. On the one hand, it has been dominated by the populist Right. In response to the Cologne sexual assaults of New Year's Eve 2015-16, for example, German supporters of *Alternative für Deutschland* rioted and called for mass deportations. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, the response of many European liberals and progressives has been that of the three wise monkeys: "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil."

But why should this debate be restricted to these two extremes? Surely good social science requires that rigorous empirical research can be carried out on complex phenomena, particularly when it is controversial and politically sensitive. After all, only then can they be better understood, and public policy measures be appropriately formulated and targeted.

When carrying out research for my new book *Prey*, I was constantly frustrated by the lack of reliable data on almost every aspect of the problematic relationship between mass migration and sexual violence.

Statistics were either a tangle of changing definitions of “sexual assault” or — in the case of a number of countries, including Sweden — they weren’t available at all.

That has now changed thanks to the work of the social scientists Ardavan Khoshnood, Henrik Ohlsson, Jan Sundquist and Kristina Sundquist. In a recent issue of the journal *Forensic Sciences Research*, they published a paper on “Swedish rape offenders”, in which they analyse the characteristics of individuals between 15-60 years old who were convicted of “rape+” against women in Sweden between 2000 and 2015. The term “rape+” here refers to both acts of rape and attempted rape, including aggravated cases.

The researchers found that, within that time-frame, a total of 3,039 offenders were convicted of rape+ against a woman in Sweden — nearly all of whom (99.7%) were men. According to the researchers, Swedish-born offenders with Swedish-born parents accounted for 40.8% of the offenders. But, strikingly, almost half of the offenders were born outside of Sweden (47.7%). Of those foreign-born offenders, 34.5% were from the Middle East/North Africa, with 19.1% hailing from the rest of Africa. As a percentage of all convicted perpetrators, therefore, 16.4% were foreign-born individuals from the Middle East/North Africa, and 9.1% were foreign-born individuals from Africa (excluding North Africa).

How far does this signify over-representation? On the basis of population records kept by the official agency *Statistics Sweden* (SCB), approximately 20% (19.7%) of the Swedish population are foreign-born individuals. Among those convicted of rape and perpetrated rape, the foreign-born account for 47.7% of those convicted — so they are over-represented by a factor of 2.4.



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Moreover, if we piece various statistics together, we find there are 565,902 foreign-born people living in Sweden who were born in North Africa and the Middle East, representing 4.9% of Sweden’s population. Yet 16.4% of those convicted of rape and attempted rape are foreign-born individuals from North Africa and the Middle East: over-representation by a factor of 3.3. And that figure rises to 4.7 when you consider all foreign-born citizens from Africa (excluding North Africa.)

Such statistics must, of course, be handled with care. There are, after all, several risks that need to be weighed up when it comes to such a sensitive and politically fraught subject. The first, and perhaps most obvious, lies in condemning entire groups, with whole categories of persons deemed “guilty” based on the criminal behaviour of a few. I think that is a mistake, ethically and analytically, not least because the overwhelming majority of foreign-born men living in Sweden are *not* guilty of crimes. It goes without saying that the group as a whole cannot be condemned for the actions of a very small percentage.

The second risk, however, is to take the complete opposite approach; to dismiss the link from migration to sexual violence through excessive relativisation. In Germany, for example, an official report warned that since not all criminal suspects are identified, comparisons between population groups are not possible. The report then noted that non-Germans living in Germany are more likely to be male, poorer, less educated, and more likely to live in urban areas. All of these characteristics, the report's authors cautioned, are associated or correlated with criminal behaviour in general, making it impossible — these criminologists say — to draw meaningful comparisons about the higher prevalence of non-Germans in criminal cases.



But such an approach is not only naïve; it also ignores the existence of a wider trend. The Swedish authors themselves state that their conclusions “are in line with previous Swedish studies... [and] are also in line with international studies from, among others, Switzerland, as well as Sweden’s neighbouring countries Norway, Finland and Denmark.”

The documented over-representation across countries, and over an extended period of time, therefore, offers real grounds for concern. To discuss this issue is not to pit “foreign” against “native,” nor to ascribe collective guilt. It is to explore, as carefully as possible, the nature of sexual violence taking place today in order to defend the basic rights of all women in Europe. At the very least, we have to take seriously the possibility that certain divergent norms based on flawed assumptions about women’s sexuality, be they cultural or religious in origin, play a role in these crimes. An over-representation of this magnitude cannot simply be attributed to socio-economic disadvantage, alienation or youthful aggression.

But a third risk of analysing sexual assault must also be mentioned: the difficulty of examining it from a criminological point of view. Some will caution that the figures in the Swedish study pertain only to individuals who were convicted — and therefore ignore the many cases of rape that are not reported to police to begin with, or those where there is insufficient evidence to establish, in a court of law, whether a suspect is guilty.



Could it be that foreign-born individuals in Sweden are singled out for prosecutions of rape and attempted rape by authorities? Or could it be that victims of rape and attempted rape in Sweden disproportionately report crimes in which the perpetrators are foreign-born? Thus far, the jury is out — though I have found no persuasive evidence to substantiate either of these hypotheses.

Whatever truth, one thing we do know is that European statistics on the characteristics of sexual offenders currently form a complex, disparate set of data; they are often difficult to locate, sometimes shrouded in secrecy. Data on perpetrators are especially few and far between. And that can be dangerous. For where information is inaccessible or obscure, the most outlandish theories can flourish in the darker corners of the internet, where the constraints of responsible editing, much less peer review, are non-existent.

The authors of this Swedish study have therefore performed a valuable service in shining a light on an excruciatingly painful topic. We can only hope that it serves as a model to researchers in other European countries, so that more effective measures can be developed to safeguard the rights of all women, foreign-born and native alike. “See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” is not a legitimate policy response to a wave of criminality that has ruined or marred the lives of tens of thousands of people.

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