



# Interpretation of the SafeGrowth method from a police perspective—Possibilities and hindrances in local crime prevention initiatives

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, the focus is on the crime prevention method SafeGrowth and its implementation in Drottninghög, Sweden. We highlight the police perspective on the implementation of SafeGrowth in Drottninghög, a risk area in Helsingborg, Sweden. Contrary to ordinary crime prevention programmes, the police are not the leading actors in the SafeGrowth process; instead, they join, as an equal party, the residents and other actors in the project. This article is partly the result of a process evaluation conducted between August 2021 and October 2022. The data consists of a focus group interview and an on-site visit and was compiled in October 2022. In the analysis, three themes related to the police perspective are identified: (1) the relationship between SafeGrowth, the area's crime problem, and evidence-based policing; (2) the contribution of SafeGrowth in terms of collective efficacy, and (3) problems related to evaluating SafeGrowth within the area. In the results, it becomes clear that, from a police perspective, the implementation of SafeGrowth may become problematic. The problems pertain to the selection of both areas and local problems to work with, the conjunction of different descriptions of realities, and organization within the project. For SafeGrowth to succeed in Drottninghög and similar areas, police perspectives must be included more clearly in order to facilitate cooperation. Despite these problems, we identified that a major advantage of the SafeGrowth method was its contribution to collective efficacy in the area, which, in turn, can be helpful to everyday police work in Drottninghög.

**Key Words** Crime prevention; CPTED; evidence-based policing; local crime problems; Swedish police; vulnerable areas; qualitative research.

## INTRODUCTION

The focus of this article is the crime prevention method *SafeGrowth* and its implementation in Drottninghög, Sweden. *SafeGrowth* is a Canadian-American method for dealing with crime prevention and safety which has been implemented in several cities in different parts of the world (cf. <https://www.safegrowth.org/>). Drottninghög was the first residential area in Europe to implement SafeGrowth. The authors followed and evaluated the implementation process (Högdahl & Thodelius, 2022). The SafeGrowth method starts by carrying out work with small, local neighbourhoods in order to fight crime and the fear of crime. With SafeGrowth, residents are taught how to work with crime prevention and how to solve their local

problems in a structured way. This article will focus on the role of the police force within the implementation process. One of the conclusions drawn in the evaluation was that the police were not sufficiently involved in the implementation of SafeGrowth, which was mainly due to the method's emphasis on co-creating crime prevention initiatives.

### Study Context

The residential area of Drottninghög is named on the list of a total of 61 vulnerable areas in Sweden which have been identified by the Swedish Police authority [Polismyndigheten]. The definition of a vulnerable area is a geographically limited area with a low socioeconomic status, where criminals can have a negative influence on the local community (Police Authorities,

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2021, p. 7). Vulnerable areas are, in turn, divided into three different categories: specific vulnerable areas, risk areas, and vulnerable areas. In 2021, the Swedish Police authority concluded that 19 areas could be characterized as specific vulnerable areas, 14 as risk areas and 28 as vulnerable areas (Police Authorities, 2021).

Drottninghög was defined as a risk area (the middle category). Risk areas often have problems with open-air drug dealing, hostility towards society, and outward violence endangering third parties. In Drottninghög, compared with violence, open-air drug dealing is considered as a more serious problem.

Being placed in this category also underlines the need for special interventions to increase the safety of residents and decrease negative social exposure in the area (Backlund, 2018). These interventions are often implemented by the municipality. In Drottninghög, the municipality and the local public housing company (Helsingborgshem) have worked very actively with different initiatives, such as different co-creation projects, neighbourhood development, and a great part of it has been refurbished (Högdahl, 2022).

Areas such as Drottninghög are prioritized in Swedish police work, on both a strategic and an operational level. In 2015, the Swedish Police Authority developed a more focussed strategy targeting organized crime. The strategy highlighted the need to fight against local criminal activities in order to decrease crime and increase safety. In addition, the strategy aimed at strengthening people's confidence in the Rule of Law among residents in vulnerable areas. This strategy is partly focussed on reducing access to weapons, violence, disorder, and drugs (Police Authorities, 2021).

In this context, SafeGrowth was implemented on the initiative of the municipality. SafeGrowth is described as a Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) project, but in contrast to other CPTED projects, this method has a bottom-up perspective. This means working with a problem-based process and relying on a "TO-FOR-WITH-BY" principle in order to facilitate long-term work in the area and contribute to participation, inclusion, and local democracy (see Högdahl & Thodelius, 2022 for an overview of the method).

In short, CPTED can be described as a crime prevention strategy that aims to alter physical environments through the use of different design strategies (Cozens et al., 2005, Cozens & Love, 2015). Since such strategies often result in major changes (and costs), they are mainly applied in relation to new constructions or renovations within an area, in order to prevent crime and insecurity. This tradition emphasized the significance of place and situation where crimes occur. While similar to situational crime prevention (SCP), CPTED can be defined as more proactive. It can be applied before a problem has occurred, unlike SCP, which is more reactive (cf. Thodelius & Ceccato, 2022, p. 48ff.).

## Objective

The objective of this article is to highlight the police perspective in the implementation of SafeGrowth in Drottninghög. Contrary to ordinary crime prevention programmes, the police are not the leading actors in the process of establishing SafeGrowth; instead, they join as an equal party together with the residents and other actors in the project. By elaborating on the role of the police in SafeGrowth in Drottninghög, we also

address the possible effects and consequences of SafeGrowth both for Drottninghög and for similar risk areas.

## THEORY AND PRACTICE

In this section, we will stress the importance of place and place-based interventions, such as CPTED, from a police perspective. Traditional policing has mainly focused on individuals and not on places where crime occurs. This can be described as a reactive form of policing founded on crime reports from the public, a kind of policing used in many countries (Lum & Koper, 2017). However, policing has been developing in recent years, and higher degrees of analysis and reflection are being applied to everyday work. Also, there is a greater focus on effectivity and development of policing methods. This, in turn, has also resulted in crime prevention work becoming more intertwined with reactive work. Today, evidence-based policing has become a general term describing the way in which development and research has had a direct influence on the practices of policing. (Lum & Koper, 2017, Police Authorities, 2022).

In addition, the development of environmental criminology, especially studies of place and space, have come to influence policing, and specifically the concept of *law of crime concentration*. Crime concentration refers to the change in focus from individuals or individual motives to the place and time of criminal occurrences (Weisburd et al., 2016).

In praxis, the law of crime concentration stresses the importance of understanding the emergence of hotspots, and why crime does not occur more randomly in a city or residential area. Explanations of crime concentration at a general level are often a combination of characteristics: the geographic location, social context, design and use of the place (Weisburd et al., 2016). Hence, crime concentrations can occur in small geographic units with specific characteristics that make it possible (and promising) to work with place-based interventions and/or design forms, such as SCP and CPTED.

## Research Methodology

To fulfil the objective, which is to highlight and elaborate on the police perspective, this article has applied a qualitative approach. The material collected included a focus group interview, informal conversations, and an on-site visit conducted in Drottninghög, Helsingborg, in October 2022. The interviews and on-site visit were part of the evaluation regarding the implementation of SafeGrowth conducted in 2021–2022 (Högdahl & Thodelius, 2022).

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for this article consisted of a focus group interview with representatives from the municipality, the local housing company (Helsingborgshem), and the local police department. After the interview, the representatives of Helsingborgshem and of the police met for an on-site visit. The on-site visit in different areas of the neighbourhood provided opportunities for informal conversation. The combination of focus-group interviews and informal conversation offered a clear picture of the role of the police in the SafeGrowth project by combining the interviewees' collective experience in the focus group and subjective experiences in the informal conversations (Dahlin-Ivanoff & Holmgren, 2017)

We applied a deductive qualitative content analysis comparing theoretical concepts and data (Krippendorff, 1980). The analysis brought out three themes: 1) the relationship between SafeGrowth and the actual crime problem; 2) evidence-based policing and contributions to collective efficacy; 3) problems when evaluating SafeGrowth.

### *Ethical Reflections*

The participants in the study were anonymized and all information was kept confidential. Individual responses to our questions or quotes used in the Results section were carefully selected so that they cannot be attributed to any specific participant (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we address the relationship between SafeGrowth and crime problem areas and evidence-based policing. Next, we highlight the contribution made by SafeGrowth in terms of collective efficacy. Lastly, we elaborate on problems related to the evaluation of SafeGrowth.

### SafeGrowth in Relation to Identified Crime Problems and Evidence-Based Policing

The implementation of SafeGrowth in Drottninghög can be described as mainly involving the residents of the area. Police involvement in the implementation was rather low. Initially, the police officers participated in some meetings and contributed a presentation of the local situation, an assignment that is in line with the Police authority's crime prevention measures (Police Authorities, 2022). However, over time, the police have mainly acted as observers in the process—including making suggestions related to interventions.

Eventually, when interventions were suggested by the residents, it became clear that there was a discrepancy between the suggested interventions and the local crime problem according to the police. For example, the local situation related to crime underlined the problems at the parking lots and at specific hotspots for open-air drugs. Even though the residents suspected that there was drug dealing in some specific areas, they had no real knowledge as to where to find the actual hotspots. In practice, they concentrated mostly on creating communal activities at the local greenhouse and other places with no obvious connections to actual crime problems. The focus in SafeGrowth shifted from crime to safety, an issue that was more relevant for the residents, most of whom had never experienced any crime in the area.

The local police addressed the fact that the green areas and places where SafeGrowth work had been carried out had not made use of police knowledge regarding place use or the occurrence of crime. Instead, safety strategies from CPTED were applied, such as creating social cohesion in the area and increasing place management. This discrepancy between crime problems and interventions can be understood in the light of Wikström's discussion about pitfalls in crime prevention (2007), who explains that sometimes the gap between the citizens' views on the causes of crime and crime occurrence and the police authority's expertise can undermine the crime prevention approach.

Despite this, the local police perceived SafeGrowth as a positive initiative for Drottninghög since the police and the

residents became more acquainted with one another, thereby strengthening their relationship. It was also clear that SafeGrowth strengthened links between the municipality and the local police, which will probably have a positive effect on future cooperation efforts.

However, this indicated that differing values were at stake. Participation in SafeGrowth strengthens relationships and trust between municipalities, residents, and the police. Yet the crime problem will persist. Possibly, the motivation for participating could have been more focused on cooperation than on crime prevention. Paradoxically, this might lead to a greater discrepancy between the residents' perceptions of crime and the police perspective, since this could make it harder to establish a mutual stand regarding the crime prevention initiative. Alternatively, as stated by one police officer: "The police handle their reality, others work with theirs."

The possibility of implementing SafeGrowth in other areas were briefly addressed, mainly since this is part of the method, a fundamental idea of which is that participants in one area will inspire and start processes elsewhere until SafeGrowth has been diffused all over the city. However, this notion might conflict with evidence-based policing in vulnerable areas.

The Swedish Police Authority's strategy for policing in vulnerable areas affirms that the police cannot solve all problems single-handedly. Instead, solutions need to be identified in cooperation with other stakeholders (Police Authorities, 2018). The role held by the police in these areas is directed towards regaining control in an area through increased police presence (BRÅ, 2016) and supporting and enabling the prevention work of other actors. This is especially important in areas that are particularly vulnerable, in which parallel structures and parallel administrations of justice are put into practice. In policing, this strategy often includes an active problem-oriented approach and the physical presence of more police professionals in an area, including foot patrolling, which seems to be having an effect on violent crime at certain hotspots (Weisburd & Telep, 2014; Ratcliffe et al., 2011).

Police presence and contacts made between police and residents are important factors when trying to reverse a negative trend, a reversal which has been facilitated by SafeGrowth. However, in our interview with the local police, we discovered a paradoxical pattern: police presence has both increased and decreased. It has increased in terms of neighbourhood police officers visiting the area and neighbourhood events being held more often but decreased in terms of less hotspot work, fewer visits to schools, and less reactive work. This means that the policing strategy became more difficult to carry out, since different actors worked in parallel with various initiatives to try to address a difficult situation. As a result, the police got closer to the residents in terms of trust and mutual respect—but this also made it harder for them to carry out more reactive work.

Even if SafeGrowth was developed to handle severe crime and safety issues, the method is not compatible with Swedish police work. In order for SafeGrowth to work in Sweden, the method needs to account for how the police work in areas according to the severity of crime problems and local situations. In other words, the police perspective needs to be included from the outset, not added ad hoc. SafeGrowth may be a method that is more suitable to implement in areas with



fewer severe problems, and where the policing resources are not as prominent. It is even possible that the method has had no effect at all on the crime problems in Sweden's vulnerable areas.

### Collective Efficacy

SafeGrowth has the ambition to reduce crime and increase safety in an area, mainly from a bottom-up perspective, such as through co-creation, local democracy, and local governance. This approach could increase the degree of collective efficacy in the areas. Collective efficacy is a term defining residents' capacity to exercise control in their neighbourhoods in terms of intervention against crime and disorder (Sampson et al., 1997). Increased collective efficacy in Drottninghög could be a positive factor for the police—especially since it can contribute to a greater willingness to report crime and counteract the code of silence in the area. It could also reduce the degree of legal cynicism and mistrust against the authorities.

### Evaluating the Effect of SafeGrowth in Drottninghög

As highlighted in previous research, all crime prevention initiatives need to be evaluated to determine their effectiveness. In the case of the SafeGrowth implementation in Drottninghög, this evaluation would be problematic to conduct. As previously described, Drottninghög is an area with many ongoing interventions and projects, and it would therefore be hard to separate out the effects of one single initiative.

For this reason, it is hard to foresee the effects of SafeGrowth in Drottninghög, in both the short and long term. In addition, Drottninghög might differ from other risk areas in Sweden since the inhabitants of Drottninghög are used to participating in co-creation projects. In addition, housing companies and the municipality are willing to invest resources in the area. This is likely to result in Drottninghög developing into an area with many advantages when it comes to implementing SafeGrowth compared with other risk and vulnerable areas in Sweden (Högdahl & Thodelius, 2022:69-70).

## CONCLUSION

As addressed in the previous section, implementing SafeGrowth without including police knowledge and strategies related to the local situation can be problematic. In addition, the aim of SafeGrowth is to work to support crime prevention with CPTED and needs to be interconnected with the identified hotspots. Otherwise there is a risk that the intervention will be inefficient or counterproductive. This problem might also have been built into the method. In SafeGrowth, the residents' description of reality is guiding the work, rather than police expertise. In police work, crime problems are being identified in relation to the law, and not to the experience or description of an area.

The situation mentioned above also explains the shift of perspective in Drottninghög, from crime prevention measures to safety work. As seen in Drottninghög, instead of dealing with crime, the SafeGrowth method focused on social cohesion and community. While this is important for the residents, by labelling the method as crime prevention, there is a risk of lines being blurred and all or nothing becomes crime prevention. Ultimately, there is a danger that this could lead to crime prevention work losing its legitimacy.

Furthermore, in Drottninghög, the role of the police in the SafeGrowth method was not defined, either in the teams or in the processes. For other SafeGrowth projects, resource teams that support local teams are assigned, but there was no such organization in Drottninghög. We argue that the police should always be present as suitable actors within a resource team, in order to support the work at more strategic levels.

Implementing SafeGrowth in areas that the Swedish police define as vulnerable and characterized by severity of crime and criminal networks can lead to controlling and influencing the local community negatively. These areas require reactive policing in order to initially control the area, before crime prevention work can be implemented. This strategy stresses the importance of frequent police presence in the areas, before other actors get involved—especially if the method truly is meant to work with pro-active crime prevention through design and place-based interventions.

In addition, since SafeGrowth is based on the participation of residents in the area and aims for co-creation and autonomous work, the method contributes to an increase in the degree of collective efficacy in the area. This contribution is highly significant since we know that collective efficacy tends to be low in vulnerable areas.

To conclude, from a police perspective, the implementation of SafeGrowth in Drottninghög, and similar areas, might be problematic. Not only is the selection of local problems to work with tricky, so too is the conjunction of residents' and police professionals' different descriptions of reality. This is important to consider in the organization of the project, so that the police expertise is used in the best way. We also see the advantages of the method in relation to collective efficacy, which could ultimately be of support to everyday police work in Drottninghög.

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