

Informal Policing of the Internal border: The Geography of Xenophobic Violence in Stockholm

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Abstract: *Xenophobic violence by non-state actors can be considered as a form of informal policing of the internal border in contemporary urban environments. As such, it contributes to the ubiquitous boundaries that face perceived migrants and racialized minorities in the conduct of everyday life. Drawing on a unique dataset of xenophobically motivated interpersonal violence in Stockholm between 2009 and 2022, this essay maps out the spatiotemporal pattern of these boundaries. Rather than serving as a 'defense' of ethnically homogenous neighborhoods, xenophobic violence is practiced throughout the urban environment, severely limiting victims' safety and mobility.*

INTRODUCTION

Racialized others may physically enter the country, but not without foreignness stamped on their faces through their racial uniforms. Accordingly, hate crimes [...] take on the unique dimension of operating as a form of border patrol and protection of the nation against the foreign 'alien'.¹

The above quote, taken from an article by legal scholar Terry Yuh-lin Chen, points to the close connections between xenophobic violence and practices of internal bordering. Whether it takes the form of coordinated vigilantism or more fluid and unpredictable forms of everyday violence, non-state actors' violence against whom they perceive as migrants and minorities constitutes a form of private policing of ethnic, racial and national difference in contemporary urban contexts.² Although such actions are seldom sanctioned by police authorities and other government officials, perpetrators often operate with a sense of duty to defend or protect their neighborhood, city, or ethnic/national/racial group.³ Being both expressive and instrumental, these acts of violence impose immediate limitations on specific individuals' freedom of movement, while simultaneously

transmitting a message of exclusion vis-à-vis the victim's associated ethnic, racial or national group.⁴ Even before the 'other' arrives, vigilantes might perpetrate pre-emptive forms of violent exclusion through the torching of accommodation sites and attacks on responsible civil servants, civil society or social movement activists, and politicians.⁵

Existing research shows that exposure to racist and xenophobic violence can severely impede on victims' and members of racialized groups' sense of safety and mobility in the city. Although these experiences differ between individuals and among members of different groups, they tend to follow similar geographical patterns. In the US and Europe, the research literature delineates a process through which victims come to avoid 'White' areas in favour of more ethnically heterogeneous neighborhoods.⁶ Non-state violence thereby enforces invisible borders within cities, excluding migrants and minorities from specific places while pushing them toward others.

While we know much about how the geography of xenophobic violence differs between mid-level geographical units such as provinces, counties and cities, however, very few studies have looked at its geographical patterns within urban space.⁷ The few authors that have studied the intra-city geographies of xenophobic violence have typically approached it from two distinct angles.⁸ Some scholars see it as a kind of defensive violence, enacted within and on the border of ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods undergoing rapid demographic change.⁹ Drawing on ecological theories of ethnic conflict, these authors suggest that violence is most

intensive in areas with strong communitarian identities, and that the cycle of violence should therefore cease as the out-group becomes culturally and materially integrated. More recent studies, however, find that the geography of xenophobic crime is akin to that of other interpersonal criminality. That is, it tends to occur in places where strangers are likely to encounter each other randomly, and where the built environment and its affordances thereby provide more general criminogenic conditions.¹⁰ The latter interpretation suggests that the informal policing that is conducted by non-state actors goes far beyond the 'defended neighborhood', severely limiting migrants and racialized minorities' freedom of movement within the city.

This article examines the geography of xenophobic violence in Sweden by presenting data on its spatial distribution in the municipality of Stockholm. I use xenophobia as an umbrella concept that, in the Swedish context, covers hostilities against migrants, Muslims, Jews, afro-Swedes, Roma and other ethnic, national and 'racial' minorities that are racialized and othered in contemporary debates on migration and ethnic diversity in Sweden.

To measure the distribution of cases, I use a unique and manually filtered dataset consisting of all police reports for violent crimes that were registered by the Stockholm police authority between 2009 and 2022, and where the police suspected that the perpetrator had a xenophobic motive. Unlike the materials used in most other register studies on xenophobic violence, these data are based on the full police reports for every single event. Through a combination of automated and manual coding, I have thereby been able to single out only those cases in which the motive is explicitly described, and where there are sufficient data to locate the event in space. Owing to the relatively consistent quality and strong coverage of such reporting within the Stockholm police authority, the dataset provides significantly higher precision than most other existing studies based on aggregated

register data, mass media reporting or crowd-sourced data.¹¹

The article traces the geography of Stockholm's xenophobic violence according to three logics: geographical neighborhood, functions (e.g. public transport or commercial districts) and spatiotemporal differences (night-time and daytime). Combined, they allow me to show how non-state violence draws and redraws Stockholm's internal borders at different levels and at different times of day.

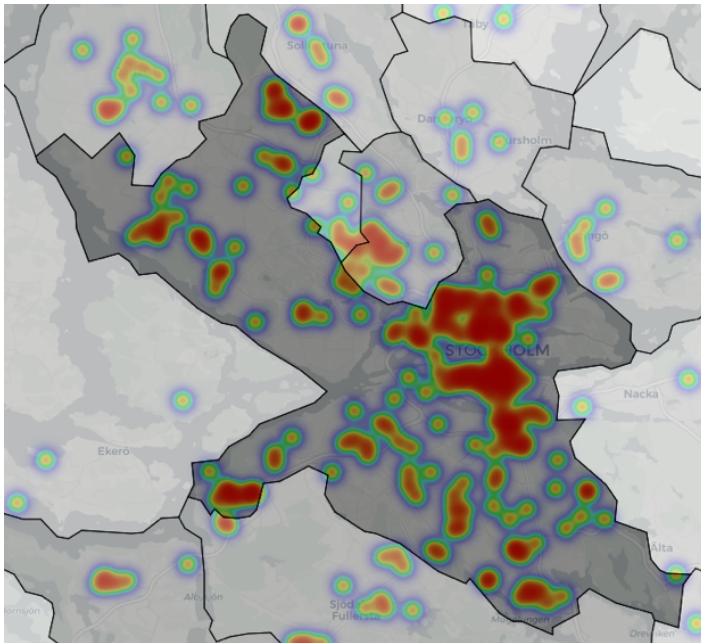
MAPPING XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE IN STOCKHOLM

Neighborhood patterns

Fig. 1 shows the geographical distribution of reported cases of xenophobic violence across the municipality of Stockholm in its entirety. To locate Stockholm in space, the neighboring municipalities have been included but marked out in lighter shades of grey. In table 1, the data are aggregated by administrative district (*stadsdelsnämnder*).

The data reveal xenophobic violence to occur throughout most of the municipality, albeit with different intensities. The dense cluster in the municipality's north-eastern corner covers the inner-city areas of *Kungsholmen*, *Norrmalm* and *Södermalm*, extending into the entertainment and sports district of *Globen/Skarpnäck*. Other large clusters cover the residential areas of *Vällingby* and *Hässelby* (west) and *Farsta* (south). Finally, there are minor concentrations in the residential areas of *Skärholmen* and *Vårberg* (South-West), *Järva* (North), and at the public transport hub in *Bromma* (center).

Fig. 1: Locations of xenophobic violence in Stockholm, 2009–2022



The cursory view provided in figure 1 (above) and table 1 (below) suggests that the geography of xenophobic violence is widely spread out throughout Stockholm's urban landscape. First, it occurs in the busy commercial and/or service industry spaces of the inner city, where strangers move about in large numbers and where unfortunate encounters are therefore likely to occur between perpetrators and potential victims. Second, it happens at public transportation hubs, i.e., in spaces that facilitate transitory encounters among strangers. Like commercial centers, transit hubs – and especially interchange stations – thereby provide situational opportunities for interpersonal crime.

A smaller subsection of incidents takes place in residential areas such as *Vällingby/Hässelby*, *Farsta* and *Skärholmen/Vårby*. These are neighborhoods with high levels of ethnic diversity and relatively low socioeconomic status. With the partial exception of *Vällingby/Hässelby*, they serve as commercial and transportation centers for the surrounding areas. Notably, very few incidents are reported from peripheral areas without direct access to the subway system.

Table 1: Most exposed areas in Stockholm

	Area	n	% of total
1	Norrmalm (Norrmalm)	59	14%
2	Katarina-Sofia (Södermalm)	47	11%
3	Maria (Södermalm)	33	8%
4	Vasastan (Norrmalm)	25	6%
5	Gamla Stan (Södermalm)	15	4%
6	Kungsholmen (Kungsholmen)	13	3%
7	Vällingby (Hässelby-Vällingby)	11	3%
8	Gärdet (Östermalm)	10	2%
9	Farsta (Farsta)	9	2%
10	Globen (Skarpnäck)	9	2%

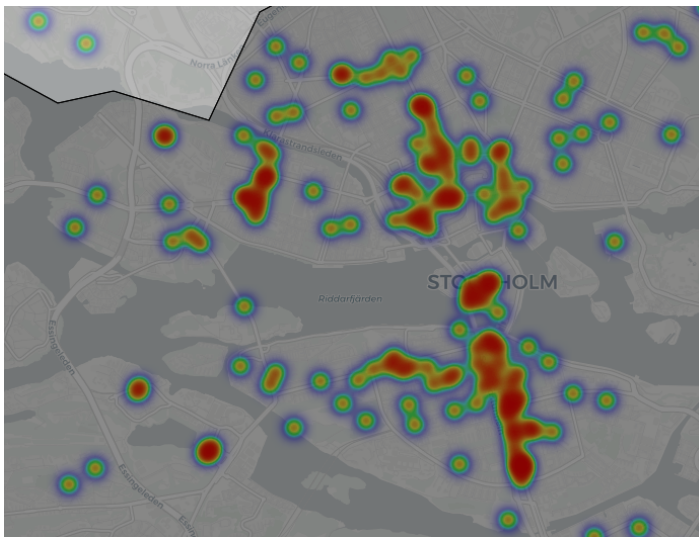
From neighborhoods to settings

Sometimes, all three types of locations combine in one place. The inner-city areas around the central station and in *Södermalm* serve both as commercial centers and as transportation hubs. Likewise, *Globen/Skarpnäck* is both the site of sports and entertainment venues and multiple interchange stations for the region's public transport networks. *Farsta* and *Skärholmen*, as mentioned, are both highly diverse residential areas and partial commercial and transportation centers. The illustration and table above are therefore of little use for determining in what kinds of settings *within* each area that xenophobic violence tends to occur.

To better understand the geographical distribution of xenophobic violence, I therefore zoom in on the most affected location, i.e. the triangle that forms between Kungsholmen, *Norrmalm* and *Södermalm*. As shown in fig. 2 (below), the distribution of cases maps closely onto the geography of Stockholm's commercial streets, nightlife and public transportation. At Kungsholmen (to the west), most of the reported cases occurred on or around the busy *St. Eriksgatan*, which combines *Fridhemsplan's* interchange station with numerous restaurants, bars and a shopping mall. In *Södermalm*, the distribution of events follows the

axis of *Götgatan/Hornsgatan*, concentrating at the transportation/bar area around *Medborgarplatsen*. At *Norrmalm*, most events occur either in or around the Stockholm central station or on the busy shopping street *Drottninggatan*. In between the three neighborhoods is an intense concentration of events in *Gamla stan*'s [the old town's] tourist and nightlife area.

Fig. 2: *Xenophobic violence in central Stockholm*



The overview of events in central Stockholm appears to support Wenger & Lantz' understanding of hate crime – and more specifically xenophobic violence – as a reflection of criminogenic places more generally. Xenophobic violence is something that tends to happen where encounters are most intense, and where strangers meet other strangers. This argument tends to hold for Stockholm as a whole. As shown in table 2, public transportation and restaurants and bars make up 209, or 55% of the total 380 investigated cases. While violence does occur in 'purely' residential areas (i.e., not in connection to any of the other settings) too, it does so to a considerably smaller extent.

Table 2: *Most common settings for xenophobic violence in Stockholm¹¹*

Setting	Total N	Days (5am–8pm)	Nights (8pm–5am)
Transportation	129	73	55
Restaurant/Bar	80	28	51
Residential area	60	36	21
Store	52	45	4
Other public place (e.g. square)	31	15	15
Other	28	20	7

The urban landscape looks different at different times of day. It thereby follows that the geography of violence will look different at different hours. On a general level, violent crime – at least among strangers – is somewhat more common in the nighttime than in the daytime. The nighttime attacks are concentrated primarily to restaurants and bars, whereas attacks in the daytime tend to happen in connection to the workplace or when the victim is working in clients' homes.¹³

Table 2 shows the distinct day- and nighttime characteristics of xenophobic violence. In the daytime, violence happens mostly in connection to public transportation, at stores, and in residential areas. At night, however, it moves into restaurants and bars. As for the general geographic distribution of xenophobic attacks, the pattern thereby follows that of other violent crime between strangers. The nightly distribution thereby strengthens the impression of xenophobic violence as being driven by more general criminogenic factors.

The data in table 2 might, however, indicate some minor differences between xenophobic violence and more general data for violent crime between strangers. Most importantly, the data indicate that xenophobic violence is somewhat more common in the daytime. Because of the low number of cases, however, the difference may well be a methodological artefact. It is also notable that the

trend toward daytime violence has been observed more generally in Sweden.¹⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Xenophobic violence by non-state actors is a small but important element of the enforcement of internal borders within contemporary urban settings. Using physical violence, vigilante groups and individual perpetrators impose physical as well as psychological and symbolical barriers on minorities and migrants' freedom to move in and through the city. By mapping incidents onto the physical geography of the city, it is possible to see what this element of the internal border looks like, and possibly how it differs between cities and between different times of day. Whereas some authors have understood this pattern as a distinct expression of the majority population's readiness to defend neighborhoods from rapid socioeconomic and demographic change, others have suggested that xenophobic violence follows more general criminogenic geographies.

This brief essay has shown how xenophobic violence is distributed throughout the physical and social geography of the municipality of Stockholm. Using a unique dataset of hate-flagged police reports registered between 2009 and 2022, the article shows the dual character of this map. In the daytime, the use of violence happens variously in residential areas and at commercial stores, i.e., in locations where people conduct their everyday activities. In the nighttime, the use of violence changes primarily to restaurants and bars. In all parts of the day, however, most events are reported from areas in and around public transportation. The article thereby suggests the general relevance of understanding the geography of xenophobic violence as closely connected to more general criminogenic factors. Rather than policing the boundaries of defended neighborhoods, the border that the offenders enact cuts permeates the city's geography.

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