

# The Celebration of Midsummer Eve in Sweden—A Study in the Art of Preventing Collective Disorder

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*This paper evaluates efforts to control collective disturbances in connection with the celebration of Midsummer Eve in Sweden. In some places, large crowds gather and disturb public order by drunken and disorderly behavior. The police have mobilized considerable resources in order to control the situation. Midsummer Eve disturbances were studied in 1987 in Borgholm, a small city on an island in the Baltic Sea, and also in 1988 after the introduction of preventive measures. The measures consisted of refusing to accept those likely to be involved in disturbances on camping sites in the surrounding area during the celebration, the closing of parking lots near the center of the city, and controlling the intake of alcohol in public places. Even though many people were arrested for drunkenness, the situation was radically changed for the better in 1988.*

**Keywords:** Collective disturbances; situational prevention; drunkenness; Sweden

## Introduction

The study of collective disorder is often problematic, since the occurrence of such events is usually hard to predict. This means that when disorder

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is studied it is mostly done retrospectively. In Sweden, people who have been arrested by the police in the course of such events have been studied and, indeed, information about the identity of these individuals is practically the only systematically obtained information available. A common finding is that individuals with a prior criminal record are overrepresented among those who participated in the disturbances.

The limited nature of available data, as well as the infrequency of these events, makes the evaluation of countermeasures very difficult. One successful retrospective study was undertaken by K uhlhorn (1978) who studied police action in response to the occupation of a centrally situated park in Stockholm by groups of drug abusers at the beginning of the 1970s, with an associated increase in crime and disorder in the park and the neighborhood. The police massively utilized the Temporary Custody Act against the occupants and succeeded in restoring order in the park. By comparing crime trends from adjoining areas, eventual displacement effects were studied. It was concluded that some displacement effects had occurred, but that overall the problem had diminished.

Another way to study the effect of countermeasures is to focus on situations that experience has shown to be critical and that occur with reasonable predictability. The celebration of Midsummer Eve in Sweden is a phenomenon that can provide such opportunities.

## The Celebration of Midsummer Eve

The celebration has its roots in the agrarian traditions of Swedish society. It has traditionally been connected with sexuality and the consumption of alcohol. That it could also cause trouble in past times is shown by a prohibition to raise maypoles in the 17th century.

Well-developed communication systems in modern society mean that it is easy for people with certain traditions of celebrating Midsummer Eve to get together. In some parts of Sweden, large crowds gather and threaten public order by disorderly and drunken behavior. The participants are recruited mainly from certain groups of young persons—so-called *raggare*—with a particular interest in large American cars. The police have been forced to mobilize considerable resources in order to control the situation in the places concerned.

## Location of the Study

One such place is Borgholm, a small idyllic town on the island of  land in the Baltic Sea. It is a typical

tourist city with about 11,000 residents. The main street, where a substantial part of the celebration takes place, is a couple of hundred yards long. Those taking part stay mostly in camping sites in the surrounding area during the holiday of Midsummer Eve. Since it is impossible for the local police to handle the situation, they are temporarily reinforced by other forces. One of the larger police districts contributes a detachment of mounted police.

## The Study

The event was studied in 1987 by means of participant observation by one of the authors (Knutsson, 1987). Since the police managed to make the local authorities take preventive measures in the following year, the study was repeated in 1988 (Knutsson, 1988). To study changes in the crowd's state of insobriety, a method using systematic social observation was developed and used in 1988. Some local groups opposed the measures the police wanted to introduce, probably fearing negative economic consequences. This conflict was studied by interviewing different key persons from the local community.

## The Intervention

In 1987, the police mainly controlled the event with traditional measures, e.g., intensive patrol and arrest of drunks and people behaving in a disorderly manner. A "rule" that stipulated a ration of alcohol—one bottle of hard liquor and 24 cans of beer per person—was introduced. It had no legal foundation, but was heavily published in the mass media.

The measures introduced the next year consisted of refusing to accept the *raggare*—the high-risk group for the disturbances—at the camping grounds and the closing of parking lots near the center of the city. The police convinced the local community, responsible for these arrangements, that this would be effective. Initially, the proposals were met with resistance, but this was overcome when the police applied some pressure, making community cooperation a condition for their continued effort.

In addition, the police also declared the celebration a "public event." During such an event, it is forbidden to be in possession of alcohol and to carry knives. Both years, the consumption of alcohol was forbidden in public places.

These measures are of a situational kind (Clarke and Mahew, 1980). They have a collective orientation in the sense that all in the perceived high-risk group

were affected. A cost of the measures is that even law-abiding individuals in the group were affected by the measures.

The activities of the police fall within the definition of problem-oriented policing (Goldstein, 1990) since they went beyond the traditional way of handling a matter that society has defined as a problem for the police and compelled those to act who can influence factors with an impact on the problem.

### Before the Intervention—the Celebration in 1987

The celebration started the day before Midsummer Eve and lasted for 3 days. Before noon on the first day, drunken young persons appeared on the main street. As the day continued, the town center became increasingly crowded with very drunk young males. The police patrolled the streets and picked up those who were unable to take care of themselves because of intoxication and placed them under custody in the local police station. Because of the limited capacity of cells, each usually contained several arrested persons.

The real feast occurred on Midsummer Eve. The participants started with drinking parties on the camping sites. Some slept in their cars in the parking lots and began their drinking there. When they were thoroughly intoxicated, they went into the city, often bringing bottles, which, when emptied, were thrown on the streets. As the day wore along, piles of broken glass accumulated.

At the height of the celebration, thousands of persons roamed up and down the streets. During the culmination late on Midsummer Eve, it was hard to move in the center because of the crush of people. The atmosphere was charged and the event could have developed into a riot. The police decided to take forceful action in order to break up the crowd. They made a "wedge" to march into the crowd: First came



**Figure 1.** Center of Borgholm during the celebration in 1987.

the police horses, after that police on foot, followed by police buses, where drunks and those arrested for disorderly conduct were held. Even though the situation was very tense, the police succeeded in keeping order and the crowd dispersed. When the revelers returned to their sleeping quarters, the police started to check the sobriety of car drivers.

### Celebrators with Police Contacts

A check of those 230 individuals with police contacts because of drunkenness, disorderly conduct, or crime showed that they were young (on the average 23 years of age, median 21 years), males (only 4% females), and frequently with a prior record of criminality (*Table 1*). It can be seen from *Table 1* that there was an overrepresentation of those with prior known serious criminality of a factor between 2.2 and 3.5. This result is consistent with other Swedish studies on public disorder.

**Table 1.** Proportion (%) of Persons with a Prior Record of Serious Crime among Those with Police Contacts during the Borgholm Celebration Due to Drunkenness, Disorderly Conduct, or Crime

Age	n*	Proportion with Prior Record of Serious Crime	Expected Values	Over-Representation
15-19	49	18%	7%	2.6
20-24	119	24%	11%	2.2
25-55	62	53%	15%	3.5

\*Including nine females.

## After the Intervention—the Celebration in 1988

During his initial briefing of the force, the chief of police underlined that the local community had changed its attitude. He stressed the importance of the newly introduced measures—especially the blocking of the camping sites for raggare and the closure of parking lots. The first task for the police was to ensure that these rules were followed.

As a possible result of media publicity, fewer people went to Borgholm than in the year before. The expected trouble with the raggare did not materialize. Those who tried to enter the camping grounds were simply sent away. The police tried to keep track of their movements with a helicopter. It was believed at the time that some went back home again when they realized that they could not have their fun. But later during the night, a site outside Borgholm was found that had accepted raggare. Some of them had ended up there and the familiar scene could be observed of drunken and misbehaving young people all over the place.

Even though many people were drunk in Borgholm in the 1988 celebrations and many were arrested by the police, the situation was radically changed for the better. However, this is not apparent when the numbers of people arrested for drunkenness are compared (*Table 2*). The difference does not adequately reflect the changed situation. On the other hand, there was a sharp decline in number of persons arrested for disorderly conduct, these arrests usually stemming from confrontations with the police.

## Systematic Social Observation

A part of the main street was observed hourly from 11 A.M. to 3 A.M. on Midsummer Eve of 1988. The

**Table 2.** Number of Persons Arrested for Drunkenness and Disorderly Conduct in Borgholm, 1987 and 1988

Year	1987	1988
Drunkenness	131	120
Disorderly conduct	42	15

proportion of persons showing signs of intoxication grew from about 5% to a maximum of 40% in the evening. The age group 13-25 showed a growing preponderance during the event, and when the celebration reached its climax, more than 80% were of this age group. About 40% were women.

An estimate of the number of persons and number of persons showing visible signs of drunkenness in the center of Borgholm was made on the basis of the observations (see *Table 3*). It can be seen from *Table 3* that at the height of the festivities between 3000 and 7000 persons, of whom about 900-3000 appeared to be drunk, were to be found in the center of Borgholm. Of those, only a fraction were arrested because of drunkenness.

## The Interview Study

Altogether, 34 key persons from Borgholm were interviewed. They represented different functions and interests in the local community and were divided in two groups: those with an interest in promoting the celebrations (generally local businessmen) and those without.

A similar proportion in both groups agreed that the decision to block the camping grounds to raggare was not discriminatory. However, those with an interest in attracting visitors believed to a larger extent that local business took economic losses. They also

**Table 3.** Estimated Maximum and Minimum Number of Participants, People Showing Signs of Drunkenness, and Number of Persons Arrested for Drunkenness, Midsummer Eve 1988

Hour	Participants		Drunk		Arrested for Drunkenness
	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	
11:00 A.M.—1:00 P.M.	1050	3000	15	540	1
1:00—3:00 P.M.	150	1650	3	33	2
3:00—5:00 P.M.	0	3000	0	480	5
5:00—7:00 P.M.	150	1950	2	468	5
7:00—9:00 P.M.	0	1500	0	120	15
9:00—11:00 P.M.	3000	7050	870	2961	21
11:00 P.M.—1:00 A.M.	2550	5550	638	1665	18
1:00 A.M.—3:00 A.M.	1050	2400	189	351	9

**Table 4.** Opinions of 34 Key Individuals Concerning the Midsummer Celebration in Borgholm 1988 Compared with 1987

	Better	No Change	Worse	No View
Drunkenness	31	2	0	1
Accidents	29	1	0	4
Public order	29	3	0	2
Vandalism	29	4	0	1

showed a tendency to be more negative about the activities of the police. Thus, there were more among those with economic interests who thought that the police went too far in their efforts to control the celebrations. But nearly all, irrespective of their point of departure, agreed that the situation had changed for the better (Table 4). As shown in the table, their judgments are in accordance with the opinion of the one of us who made the participant observations.

## Conclusions

In a situation where it is culturally acceptable to drink excessively—such as during Midsummer Eve celebrations in Sweden—there will always be some individuals who exceed the bounds of acceptability and may become a threat to public order. This was the case in Borgholm for a number of years, where the tradition of celebrating Midsummer Eve had regularly attracted excessive numbers of people prone to behave in a disorderly manner.

As a result, the police were faced with a difficult situation to manage, and in seeking to prevent a repetition in 1988, they took two important steps: They strengthened some more or less formal controls pertaining to the consumption of alcohol during the celebrations and they excluded some potentially troublesome groups from the town. These measures, accompanied by considerable media publicity, improved matters quite substantially.

The police measures taken in Borgholm provide a further example of the way in which a situational preventive approach can result in the effective management of a problem of drunkenness and public disorder (see also Ramsay, 1991). Experience at Borgholm provides evidence of the particular value of excluding troublesome individuals from potentially fraught situations.

According to press accounts, this approach is sometimes employed by the authorities in attempting to prevent disturbances at soccer matches. It might be

anticipated, however, that such measures will encounter opposition, not just from those excluded, but also from others such as civil libertarian pressure groups and those whose profits might be lowered by reduced public attendance at the events. Even at Borgholm, the police encountered resistance from some merchants who anticipated economic losses as a consequence of the preventive measures.

This is nothing new in the Swedish history of crime prevention. For example, the banks in Sweden had to be threatened with legislation before they agreed to the introduction of tighter procedures to prevent check forgery, even though these procedures turned out to be highly effective (Knutsson and Kiihlhorn, 1982).

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