

SWEDISH YOUTH OVERVIEW

Recently the following quote was seen written on a park fence in Stockholm. It reads: "I am not afraid of death or even for my past, because nothing can compare with my fear of the future."

This thought characterizes many young people in Sweden today. They face an uncertain future, an uncertain Europe, and an uncertain world. Today's teenagers have seen it all, heard it all, and experienced it all. They have become old before their time.

The kingdom of Sweden, with its 8.7 million inhabitants and over 700,000 teenagers, is an amazing and beautiful country. This beautiful country with beautiful people has one of the highest standards of living in the world—no poverty: the model welfare state. These are some of the first impressions. In reality, Sweden has recently faced a major economic crisis that has made it less than the "utopia" of northern Europe. With the national treasury depleted, the model welfare state is failing, crashing down upon the people who have become dependent on the system. Unemployment has increased in the past several years, especially for those under age twenty-six. Crime is increasing. Sexual, physical, and emotional abuse have reached epidemic proportions. Attempted and actual suicide rates are among the highest in the world. It is a new time for Europe and for teenagers growing up in Sweden. They face new challenges and obstacles that teens have never before faced.

GROWING UP SWEDISH

According to UNICEF, children in Sweden are the safest and richest children in the world, receiving the best education of the globe. In addition, Swedes share the highest life expectancy and lowest infant death rate.

Sweden has an excellent health and education system that provides outstanding care from cradle to grave. Most teenagers finish their secondary education at age nineteen. Ten percent complete a competitive university degree, and a large percentage take advantage of specific vocational training beyond their teenage years.

There are several ingredients defining and shaping the lives of the young in Sweden. It is important to consider these influences to accurately understand Swedish youth and what it means to grow up Swedish. For example, the spanking or corporal punishment of children by parents is against the law. The

impact of this law is reflected in teenagers' regard for authority, and is easily seen by foreigners who witness a group assembly at which there are children.

DAGIS (DAYCARE)

With approximately 85% of Swedish women working full-time, the majority of kids (90%), grow up in a collectivized daycare system. (*Statistiska Centralbyran*) A very early separation from the mother and child is encouraged. This profoundly affects and influences childhood and early adolescent processes, while also influencing children's future roles as parents. Barbro Backberger, a leader in Sweden's feminist movement notes, "The idea that someone should be supported within the marriage can never find acceptance in a socialist society. For this reason, marriage, as an institution where one non-working partner is supported, must be abolished, the children should be supported by the state and cared for and/or raised collectively and every adult be self-sufficient." (*New Dimensions: The Psychology Behind the News*. November, 1990.)

Although most towns and parents are in support of the child daycare system, there are also its outspoken opponents. Dr. Eric Brodin of the University of Stockholm says that "...as a result of this policy of massive compulsory daycarism, you see young children desperately asking to be loved, to be fondled, to be touched, to be kissed." "There is a tragic quality to life in Sweden today. Youth are listless, goalless, unable to see that anything they do as individuals has any real consequence." "In no other society have I seen such a degree of alienation, isolation, purposelessness, lack of individuality or motivation as among the children and young of Sweden's welfare state." (*ibid.*)

JANTILAGEN

"Jantilagen" is a Swedish philosophy conveyed in all levels of education and society. It holds that everyone is the same and that no one person is better than anyone else. At first, this theory appears sound. Yet, "jantilagen" can stifle individualism, create a force for "sameness" among teenagers, and favor intolerance for those who try to step out of the norm. This characteristic also emerges among teenagers growing up in Japan. Among Swedish youth, this intolerance takes on an ugly form called "mobbing." This mental and physical abuse is a reaction against those who do not fit the status quo. It will be considered later in this paper.

INVANDRARE (IMMIGRANTS)

Sweden has been a leader of countries that give humanitarian aid to refugees. Since World War II, there has been an influx of refugees and immigrants into Sweden. One in nine citizens is foreign born or a first generation child since

W.W.II. In major cities, these rates are even higher. In Stockholm, for example, 19% of the inhabitants fall into this category. (*Svenska Dagbladet* 941202) (*Statistiska Centralbyran*) This plays an increasingly significant role in the country and has profound effects on teenagers, causing both positive and negative repercussions.

DIFFERENT SUBCULTURES

Swedish youth subcultures follow the identifiable patterns of most teenagers in the Western World. There are significant numbers of teens who enjoy punk, hip-hop, and grunge. One frequently sees label chasers clad in Polo, Henri Lloyd, and Patagonia, as well as Swedish labels Peak Performance and Boomerang.

SKINHEADS

Paired with the emergence of economic problems in Europe is a rise in nationalism and the search for a "scapegoat" to the continental challenges. Sweden is no exception. In the past few years the number of skinheads has risen drastically among teenagers and young adults. Even more alarming is the growing number of "baby skins"—early teens and younger—tangled in the frenzy of hatred and violence. In an attempt to address this epidemic, the government has recently outlawed the wearing of "Nazi" symbols and is more harshly punishing race related crime.

INVANDRARE

A closely guarded identity has emanated from each new immigrant group to Sweden. Most of the invandrare are housed in communities and housing that aids this process. One suburb of Stockholm, Botkyrka, receives more than 60% of its inhabitants from newly relocated immigrants of Africa, Asia, South America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. (*Statistiska Centralbyran*) After a period of adaptation to Sweden, many invandrare relocate in areas that have a high concentration of their former compatriots.

SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Statistics often mirror cultural trends:

- Urbanization and industrialization occurred late in Sweden, but since the 1950s the transformation has been extremely rapid. (*Svensk Mentalitet*, 1989)
- One in four babies is born to immigrants. (*Statistiska Centralbyran*)
- Violence in schools has increased by 62% in the last four years in Stockholm. One third of those involved were injured so severely that they needed hospital treatment. (*Dagens Nyheter* 951208)

- Twenty-seven percent of youth ages 13 to 17 carry a weapon—most often a knife. (*Expressen* 941102)
- Sweden has the highest divorce rate in Europe. (*Statistiska Centralbyran*)
- Eating disorders are the second highest cause of death among young women. (*Folkhälsoinstitutet* and *Socialstyrelsen*) (*Aftonbladet* 951214)
- Sweden spends more than \$7,000 a year per student—more than any other country. Its young people, however, have only middling scores on comparative international testing. (*Wall Street Journal* 920407)
- Sweden has implemented compulsory sex education for 60 years.
- Teenage pregnancies (15-19 years-old) compared with the United States per 1,000: USA 53.6 births; Sweden 11.9 births. (*Statistiska Centralbyran*, 1995)

How do Swedes view themselves? Ake Daun, professor of Ethnology at the University of Stockholm in his book, *Svensk Mentalitet*, says, "Here are some self-stereotypes by different groups: school children (aged 15-16), a representative sample of Swedes (aged 16-74) and a small sample of Swedish businessmen. The school children perceived Swedes to be mainly 'stressed,' 'sporty,' 'well-dressed' and 'modern'; the respondents of the general sample mentioned 'envious,' 'stiff,' 'hard-working,' and 'nature-loving'; the Swedish businessmen mentioned 'well organized,' 'trustworthy,' 'rational' and 'efficient.'" (*Svensk Mentalitet*, 1989)

SPECIAL NEEDS, PROBLEMS, ISSUES

FAMILY STRUCTURE

There exists an atypical family structure in Sweden today. Four out of every seven partnerships are unwed, and less than 40% of the families in the greater Stockholm area, for example, are two-parent families. (*Statistiska Centralbyran*) This factor, combined with problems that naturally surface from working families and the fierce independence created in young people by collectivized daycare, complicates an ever increasing "latch key" problem among kids. Although younger children participate in after-school programs to offer supervision, budget cuts have eliminated these programs for teenagers.

Support systems for kids have been breaking down due to the amount of time kids have spent in daycare and away from parents. Traditional support systems of church, family, and school are almost non-existent for Swedish teens. The church holds almost no influence in society, with only 2% of the population claiming regular involvement. (ibid.) The peer group has long surpassed the family as the shaper of behavior and values among teens. Today's youth treat their parents like "buddies" or "pals" instead of authority figures.

MOBBING

Mobbing, or the physical and emotional hazing of others, is prevalent in Scandinavia and is a serious problem among youth. Many times it leads to injury, low self esteem, depression, and even suicide. The related statistics are found in *Expressen* (941102):

- One in three teenagers claims to have been a victim of mobbing.
- Among those being mobbed, 29% are Swedish and 38% come from invandrare backgrounds.
- Twenty-seven percent of youth claim to have helped mob another person.
- Ten percent of all suicides among Swedish youth are directly linked to mobbing.

GANGS

Teenage gangs have mushroomed over the past several years in most cities. In Stockholm, gangs have been formed by different ethnic groups and other gangs identify themselves with a particular subway stop. Violence usually surfaces when gangs travel to fight rivals along the subway routes. Compounding this is increasing racial conflict and confrontation between skinheads and invandrare.

"Children under stress develop a pack mentality. When there's turmoil and social change, teenagers have tendency to break loose and follow each other more. The leadership of adults is somewhat splintered and they're more on their own—sort of like *Lord of the Flies*." (Dr. John Schowalter, President—American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry)

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

The increase in drinking among Sweden youth contrasts other European countries, where teenage drinking has actually decreased, says alcohol researcher Dr. Anders Romelsjo. He cites that Swedish youth grow up in surroundings that place them at serious risk of alcohol abuse. Thirteen-year-olds are especially susceptible to this risk. (*Aftonbladet* 950523, 931015)

Several sources offer compelling data (*Dagens Nyheter* 951004, *Expressen* 950228, *Aftonbladet* 950523, 931015):

- Drug abuse is rising, but the most common drug of choice among youth is alcohol.
- Only in Finland, Iceland, and Wales do teenagers drink more than in Sweden.
- There was a 47% increase in drinking among youth between 1991 and 1994.

- Alcohol is involved in 75% of all crimes of violence among youth.
- One in ten fifteen year-old boys tested positive for anabolic steroids.

SPECIAL STRENGTHS, ASSETS AND RESOURCES

The strength of Sweden's government and the manageable size of the country aid efforts to gain control over youth problems. Recently there has been increased networking among government, education, religious, law enforcement, and non-profit associations. Problem children are much more easily identifiable and help is available. Sweden's internal structure of *kommuns* (municipalities) and *landskap* (provinces) help to establish lines of responsibility and action.

There is a well-established network on the local level to deal with the most common teenage problems. Meticulous record keeping and availability helps to make information accessible for those assisting teenagers. Additional efforts need to be made by youth workers in the field who have relationships with kids. They need to stay in contact with the agencies organized to help young people.

TRENDS IN YOUTH CULTURE

There has been a shift from faithfulness to authenticity or self gratification among teenagers. Family responsibilities used to be regarded as absolutes. One should be faithful to commitments regardless of cost or feelings. Commitments once tied to responsibility and will are now tied to emotion. The most common response of Swedish teenagers when asked to throw away the garbage is, "Jag orkar inte." (I don't feel like it.)

Media is making a strong impact on the lives of teenagers. In the last six years television choices have moved from two government controlled stations to five additional commercial channels and unlimited choices from satellite dishes.

For years Sweden has maintained strict control over violence in the film industry. In recent years, government censoring of violence in movies has all but been removed. This has dramatically impacted upon youth who have traditionally been shielded from exposure to unnecessary film violence. There exists an alarming increase of violent acts in Swedish society that mirror and "copy cat" film violence.

CONCLUSION

The issues that face Swedish youth are typical of teenagers around the world. When the latest idea has been expounded, when the last program has been implemented, it all returns to the global desire of teenagers to be loved, listened to, and treated with dignity. The future measure of success of youth workers in Sweden will not be measured statistically, but by adults who are willing to break

into the world of teenagers and get personal. The casual interloper will never get close enough to hear the sounds of teenagers in pain. Sweden needs adults who are willing to enter the world of teenagers with love, compassion, and time.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. In what ways have Europe's recent economic problems shaped attitudes among the young? Why is there such a need to find a "scapegoat" when times are difficult? How might youth workers combat attitude?
2. How do differences in child rearing affect teenagers? In what ways does family structure affect youth within a society? How does a parent give positive direction to their children when there are so many influences rearing their children?
3. What effect does daycare and daily separation from parents play in a child's development? What steps could be taken to establish a greater warmth of relationship? How are young people finding structure for their lives? What can be done for the thousands of "latch-key" teenagers?
4. How might support systems be established to aid immigrants in their period of acculturation? How do the struggles faced by youth immigrating to Sweden parallel those faced by immigrants in other countries? How can youth workers worldwide assist each other in this area?
5. How do mobbing and hazing affect young people? What can be done at the grassroots level to deal with this problem? By parents, teachers, and youth workers?
6. How has the government censorship of movie violence helped youth in the past? What effect has the lifting of this control produced? What might this say to countries now concerned about escalating violence who have not had such measures in place? How do youth workers help teenagers become less violent?
7. What could Sweden learn from other countries about youth gangs? What new steps can be implemented before the situation grows uncontrollable?

IMPLICATIONS

1. We are no longer live in isolated countries. Just as "no man is an island," so it is that no country is an island. We live in a "global village" and as such there is much to be learned from those around us. What Sweden experiences in terms of immigrants, youth gangs, and increased violence are subjects that many other countries have faced and are facing daily. Much can be learned by youth workers in an international dialogue. Too much energy is spent "reinventing the wheel." Steps must be taken to provide current information and practical solutions with youth workers.
2. Swedish ideas on socialism, as well as daycare and child rearing are being embraced by countries around the world. It might be wise to look more

closely at the effects of these trends before determining what is culturally transferable. Sweden has long provided sex education and physical punishment. The outcomes—years after their inception—should be examined more in more detail.

3. Film and TV programming are strongly influencing the actions of young people today. Difficult lessons currently being learned in Sweden involving the effects of film violence on youth may have global impact. The dramatic change in violence when the controls loosened is shocking. A whole new generation of Swedish kids are being raised on heavy doses of "The Power Rangers" and prime time porn.
4. In what ways can youth workers, organizations, and interested adults better understand youth culture and its implications? How can a global effort utilize resources and target youth in new ways?

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