

**News**

Immigrants struggle to find work in the Nordics despite labour shortages

**News**

Unexpected delay of the EU platform directive

**Editorial**

Socially excluded young people, a key issue across the Nordics

**News**

Threats to Swedish social service workers: New inquiry proposes stricter legislation

Feb 29, 2024

## Theme: Socially excluded youths



Newsletter from the Nordic Labour Journal 2/2024



Financed by  
Nordic Council of  
Ministers

## **NORDIC LABOUR JOURNAL**

Work Research Institute  
OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University,  
Postboks 4 St. Olavs plass, NO-0130  
Oslo

## **PUBLISHER**

Work Research Institute, OsloMet  
commissioned by the Nordic Council of  
Ministers.  
The Nordic Council of Ministers is not  
responsible for the content

## **EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Björn Lindahl

## **EMAIL**

[nljeditor@gmail.com](mailto:nljeditor@gmail.com)

## **WEB**

[www.nordiclabourjournal.org](http://www.nordiclabourjournal.org)

An email edition of the newsletter can  
be ordered free of charge from  
[www.nordiclabourjournal.org](http://www.nordiclabourjournal.org)

ISSN 1504-9019 tildelt: Nordic labour  
journal (online)



## **Contents**

Socially excluded young people, a key issue across the Nordics .....	3
Danish Royal stardust for youth jobs in Esbjerg ....	5
Employment specialist helped Norwegian Julia (17) find her dream job .....	8
Iceland: Work is better than therapy for vulnerable youth .....	14
Immigrants struggle to find work in the Nordics despite labour shortages .....	17
Nordic researchers want political action on NEETs .....	20
Considerable local differences in Sweden's efforts for NEETs .....	23
Threats to Swedish social service workers: New inquiry proposes stricter legislation .....	26
Unexpected delay of the EU platform directive ...	30
Karen Ellemann: All of the Nordics in Nato “positive in every way” .....	31
Aiming for full mobility in the Nordic region's largest labour market .....	34

# Socially excluded young people, a key issue across the Nordics

Across the Nordic region, there is a focused search for measures to include young people who are not in education or employment into the labour market. Researchers agree that the best solution is for young individuals to be followed up by people they can have close and long-term relationships with. But the number of people who find themselves socially excluded remains approximately on the same level.

EDITORIAL

29.02.2024

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

All the Nordic countries are below the EU average, however, where 12 per cent of young people between 15 and 29 were “NEETs” in 2022 – not in education, employment or training – according to Nordic statistics.

That same year, the level in the Nordic countries varied between 5 and 10 per cent. But while the EU sees a clear downward trend, things are more mixed in the Nordic region. Three countries were on the same level in 2022 while the proportion of NEETs grew in one country and fell in another.

There is also considerable variations within the countries. A fresh survey from Sweden shows that the highest NEET proportion on a municipal level is four times that of the lowest one.

If you ask young people themselves, they say the problem is being tired of school combined with difficulties finding jobs if they have dropped out of higher secondary education.

“Not everyone fits into a school situation. I feel it is bordering on hysteria with all this focus on getting everyone to finish upper secondary education. Of course, it is possible to get a job without,” says work specialist Tonje Kathrine Kretschmer Thue.

She has been working with “Individual Placement Support”, IPS, for adults since 2015. Two years ago, she joined an IPS programme for young people.

In this issue, we look at social exclusion among young people from different angles. We meet young people and employment specialists in Norway, where a knitting shop turned out to be the perfect workplace for Julia Engan Pettersen, and we speak to researchers who have compiled hundreds of reports to see what works.

An initiative in the Danish municipality of Esbjerg got “The Crown Prince Couple’s Stardust Award” which each year is given to innovative players in the field of social work. Half of the 183 youths who have participated in the “Energy for Each Other” programme are now employed.

In Iceland, an agreement between the Ministry of Labour, employers and the Directorate of Labour has led to a sharp uptick in the efforts to help young, socially excluded people.

And we have interviewed Lena Engberg, the General Director of the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society:

“The correct priority is not big measures late in the day, but smaller measures early on, if fewer young people are to avoid social exclusion,” she says.

She underlines that social exclusion does not impact the young people only:

“Parents, grandparents and others have told us about how this affects people’s health, social life and economy,” says Lena Nyberg.

In this issue, we also take a look at a new Swedish inquiry that proposes stricter penalties for violence and threats towards public servants, as well as making it a crime to insult public servants.

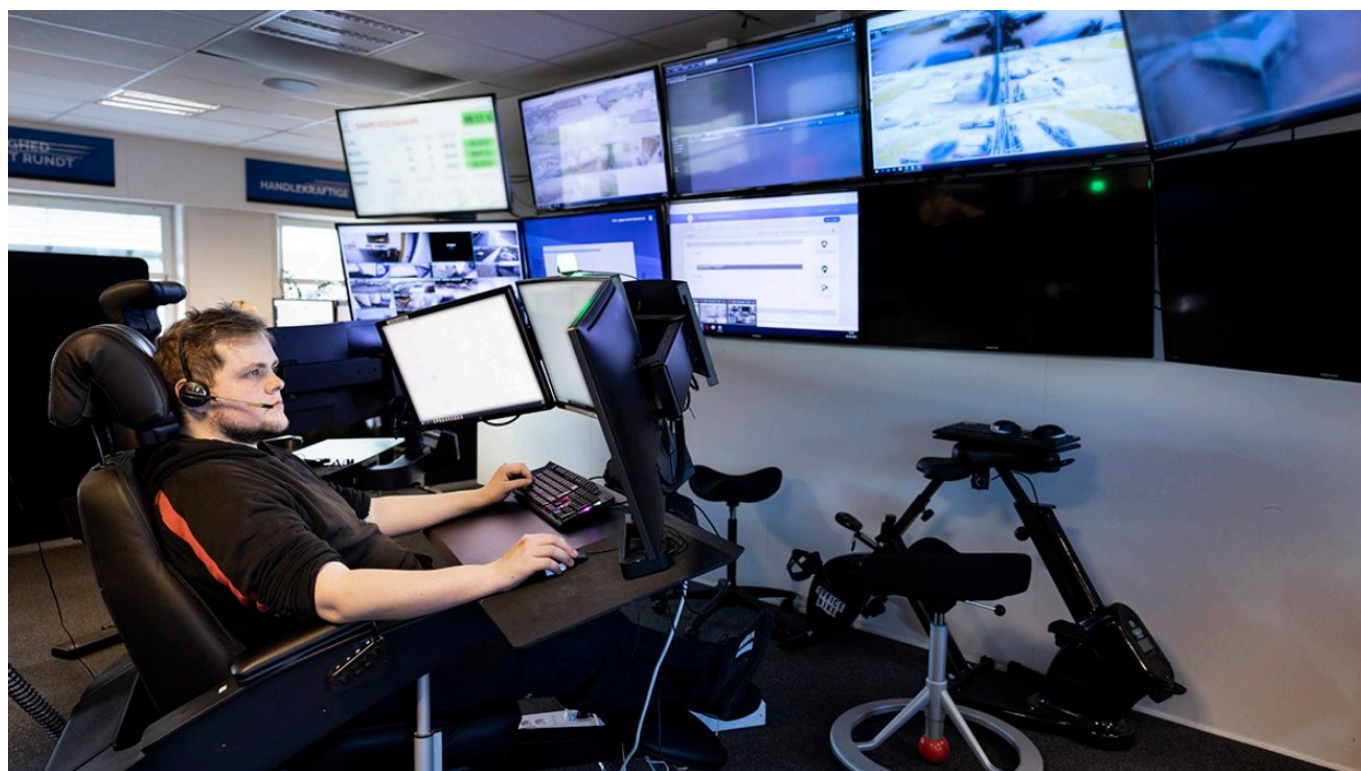
This comes in the wake of a social media disinformation campaign that blew up in 2022, where it was wrongfully claimed that Swedish social services kidnapped children, especially those from Muslim families.

The campaign made everyday life more dangerous and unsafe for social workers dealing with children and young people in vulnerable areas.

Meanwhile, at the Finnish company Snellman, there is peace and harmony between immigrants and native workers. The company is one of Finland's largest producers of a range of foodstuffs, like meat toppings. It is situated in bilingual Jakobstad, which means the immigrants need to be able to speak three languages in addition to their own: Finnish, Swedish and English.

Finally, we also look at the latest developments for the EU platform work directive, which has run into unexpected resistance.





## Danish Royal stardust for youth jobs in Esbjerg

“Energy for Each Other” is a youth initiative in Esbjerg municipality, known across Denmark, which has won an award for getting young people into education and work. Three of those young people now work at Den Jyske Kontrolcentral, where head of operations Erik Sørensen is very content with his young co-workers.

THEME

29.02.2024

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: TOMAS BERTELSEN

Den Jyske Kontrolcentral is a private company located in an industrial park outside of the city of Esbjerg on the Danish west coast. The offices are staffed 24 hours by people working in a large surveillance room plastered with screens that monitor customers’ alarm systems. Three of the employees are young men in their 20s who have been part of the “Energy for Each Other”-initiative that helps young people get into work or education.

“As a company, we have benefitted greatly from being part of “Energy for Each Other”, and we are very happy about the young people we have employed as a result,” says head of operations Erik Sørensen.



The three young people – Andreas, Simon and Jasper – are a gain for the workplace in many regards, he explains.

“Our other employees enjoy being able to take social responsibility and take into consideration the young men and their vulnerability in a good way.”

It also benefits the company’s recruitment and leads to less turnover, he says.

“We get in touch with qualified young people who we would not meet through the normal recruitment system because they don’t read job postings. They stay here for a long time too.”

#### **A royal award**

“Energy for Each Other” was awarded the Crown Prince Couple’s Social Stardust Award in November 2023, an award that each year goes to an innovative contributor in the field of social work. The award was presented during a show at the Esbjerg Performing Arts Centre by King Frederik and Queen Mary, who at that time were the Crown Prince Couple.

The award stated that “Energy for Each Other” is based on the needs and desires of young people and employs new methods in guiding them towards jobs and education. “An inspiring approach to one of society’s major challenges,” was among the reasons given for the award.



*“Energy for Each Other” got the “Crown Prince Couple’s Stardust” award in November 2023. It was presented by King Frederik and Queen Mary, who at the time were the Crown Prince Couple. Photo: Agnete Schlichtkrull.*

“Energy for Each Other” is run by Esbjerg’s municipal job centre. The initiative is:

- Holistic
- Community-based
- Inclusive
- Hands-on

Since the project’s start in 2020, more than half of the 183 participating young people between 16 and 27 have entered education or the labour market. The participants are so-called “activity-ready”, i.e. young people who are not immediately ready to manage a job – many of them struggle with anxiety and other mental challenges.

For this target group, the municipality has created a different job centre which helps the young people themselves to want to start work or an education.

Making the young people capable to fend for themselves is the goal. That is why contact with local businesses plays an important role in “Energy for Each Other”. The young people can participate in internship programmes and meet companies to see how work is conducted there.

#### **Gamer and night worker**

One of Erik Sørensen’s young employees is gaming a lot at home at night and met Sørensen when he participated in “Energy for Each Other”.

“He discovered that there are jobs like here at Den Jyske Kontrolcentral where the work happens in front of a screen and where he could work at night. He didn’t know this before,” says Erik Sørensen.

The young person was first offered a trial internship at Den Jyske Kontrolcentral and has been employed for two years now. He feels his anxiety levels have dropped.

Den Jyske Kontrolcentral and the other local companies that take part in “Energy for Each Other” have received guidance on how they can work strategically and practically to take

social responsibility, like by hiring, receiving, retraining and developing this group of young people.

“It has been good for us as a company to be equipped to take social responsibility. We have formulated a CSR strategy, so we now know why and how we do what we do. I am convinced that in the long run, it will also yield an economic benefit,” says the operations manager at Den Jyske Kontrolcentral.



### **Mental health improvement**

An evaluation of “Energy for Each Other” shows that participants experience that they:

- Have gained a better structure of their days
- Have become more social and less isolated
- Have become better at identifying their strengths and limitations and are happier with themselves
- Have more energy for a higher activity level
- Are doing better mentally – e.g. having less anxiety, feeling less depressed and experiencing fewer mood swings

The young people's own suggestions for what makes the initiative work:

- Feeling safe in a place with good energy alongside adults and peers who are open and curious
- Having a consistent youth advisor for support, such as managing finances or dealing with case workers, psychiatrists, and doctors
- Concurrent treatment for substance abuse and psychiatric follow-up alongside the intervention
- Changes at their own pace
- Responsibility and autonomy





## Employment specialist helped Norwegian Julia (17) find her dream job

Close cooperation between two public authorities in Norway is giving young people with mental health challenges a new chance in the classroom or in the labour market. Employment specialist Anne Tvedt helped Julia Engan Pettersen find her dream job.

THEME

29.02.2024

TEXT AND PHOTO: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

“You see? Of course this is the dream job!”

Julia Engan Pettersen has opened the door to a small paradise for us who are interested in yarn, knitting, crocheting, textiles and sewing projects. We are visiting Julia’s workplace Stitsj – a mall, cosy sewing and knitting shop in the middle of Hamar city centre, run by two women.

A few months ago, they were joined by Julia. It was not a given that it would turn out this way.

### Looking for a new beginning

Julia comes from a small place in Sogn in Vestland County. Her school years did not turn out like they ought to have done. Julia tells us she was bullied. Her school attendance was poor. Life was difficult.

Julia is getting help to meet the challenges life has presented her with so far. She sees a psychologist among other things. One year ago, she moved to Hamar.

“I wanted a fresh start. A change in my life. I wanted to try to live again,” says Julia. In Hamar, she was offered a place with IPS ung. Taking part is voluntary and Julia accepted. She met employment specialist Anne Tvedt. That became the beginning of a new and better life.



*Employment specialist Anne Tvedt (left) and Julia Engan Pettersen are both very interested in yarn. Anne is going to knit a sweater and asks Julia for advice on colours.*

### **Produces results**

IPS ung was established in 2022 and still in its early stages. The Work Research Institute at OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University – has conducted an evaluation of IPS ung on behalf of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration.

The results show that IPS ung helps more people start work, especially the oldest in the target group.

“We see a noticeable increase in young people getting into work after participating in the programme. This is a very encouraging result,” says Professor Ira Malmberg-Heimonen at the Faculty of Social Sciences at OsloMet.

The majority of the participants are happy with IPS ung. Some of the things they say are:

- That the employment specialist has helped them get into jobs and education
- That they see the employment specialist as a strong and supportive person
- That they feel heard, taken seriously and that they experience an improved quality of life as a result of the cooperation

### **Meeting in informal settings**

Anne Tvedt has been an employment specialist with the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration NAV for nearly one year. She applied because she wanted to be able to follow up young people over time.

Julia was the first young person she met at the office. Or, not quite. They have never actually met at the office. Anne meets the young people in cafes, at the library or while taking a walk, depending on how the young person feels and what they prefer. The employment specialist is never far away from the young people.

But while Anne has a close relationship with the young people she follows up, she is clear about her main mission:

“I am helping them with a job. I am not their psychologist. Other people have that role,” says Anne.





### Opening, not closing, doors

Anne and Julia got on well straight away. They discovered they shared many common interests. And when they now both take out their knitting and chat about yarn, colours, patterns and their next knitting project, you would be excused for thinking they have been friends for years.

“I quickly realised the interest in handicraft was something we could build on,” says Anne. Although she did not immediately know of an employer in the handicraft business who might offer work for an untrained 17-year-old, they both aimed for something like that.

“My task as a job specialist is to open doors, not to close them. I call it a kind of IPS ung naivete – we must keep faith when others see no solutions,” says Anne.



*Anne Tvedt is employed by NAV. She believes employment specialists could also be employed in the health sector.*

As an employment specialist, she tries to find out the things the young people feel work and what is not OK, what are their interests and what motivates them.

“What is needed to succeed? Together we put together a plan for how we should proceed, and then we have follow-up meetings and remain close,” says Anne.

IPS ung employment specialists feel it is particularly challenging to help the youngest participants find a job. For many roles, employees have to be 18.

### “A kind of grief”

IPS ung aims to get young people into ordinary work. Another stated aim is to help young people finish their upper secondary education and apprenticeships. Some IPS ung teams mainly work with young people and schooling, while other teams work with youths who cannot deal with more education and who would rather try working.

For Julia, school is no longer an option. At least not for the time being.

It is sad, silly and upsetting, but I have accepted that school is not for me right now,” says Julia.

She finds it difficult not to be “like everybody else”, those who are in upper secondary school and through that are part of a community.

“It is quite heavy. I feel I am lagging behind and that something is lacking. It is a kind of grief. At the same time, I know that I cannot attend school right now,” says Julia.

### “Super scary!”

While looking for a workplace suitable for Julia, Anne heard that Stitsj was looking for people – but preferably someone aged over 18.

Anne challenged the employer on the age limit. They agreed that Julia could attend a job interview. Only the idea of meeting someone she did not know and also talking to them scared Julia senseless.

“It was super scary!”



*When Julia (left) and Anne meet, they happily knit together while chatting.*

Before the job interview, Anne and Julia talked a lot together, about what was important to tell the employer, which chair Julia would want to use and what Anne should do if Julia could not manage to say anything at all.

They made each other safe in their roles. Julia knew she had Anne. Anne knew when she needed to help.

### Talked about snails

On the day of the interview, Anne went to see Julia at home first. They would walk together to the workplace.

“I would not have been able to get to that job interview on my own. Everything was chaos. I was about to pass out. When we left the house to walk to the job, I felt uneasy and stressed,” says Julia.

But on the way there, they did not talk about jobs or the interview. Because Julia had given Anne one important message: You have to talk about something else, all the way there! So Anne and Julia talked about snails.

“I had read up a bit on snails because I knew Julia and I could talk about this. And it worked,” says Anne.

And the job interview, how did that go?

“It was scary but it went well. They were really nice and already showed me a lot of consideration. I have been really lucky – with the workplace and with Anne,” says Julia.

Today, Julia is employed at Stitsj part-time.

### Like a small family

Anne says they have used some NAV resources in order to make this work. The employer has been given wage subsidies and is part of a mentor programme. The latter involves paying one of the staff for a few hours a week to give Julia some extra time and support.

“It is very safe. The people I work with here are very understanding. They are good at adapting things. We are like a small family at work,” says Julia.

She has good days and bad days. Sometimes it can be hard to get to work when she is supposed to. The colleagues show flexibility and sometimes they can swap shifts. Other times, they move her working hours.



*Julia has found her dream job among yarn and textiles.*

But Julia prefers to go to work.

“On those difficult days, it can be a struggle just getting out of bed. But it is important to have something to go to and something to do. I try to make it work. It is better to be at work and do something than sitting alone, thinking,” says Julia.

### Follow-up

It is up to the employee, and in this instance the young person, how much information about their mental health they

want to share with the employer. Not saying anything makes it harder for the employer to adapt things for the employee.

“In my experience, most young people want to be open about their own mental health and many employers are inclusive,” says Anne.

For an employment specialist, the work is not done once the young person has found a job. Anne will now follow up Julia and her employer for a while. The aim is permanent work, but this does not always happen after the first try.

### Challenges to be solved

There are challenges with the model when it is applied to young people, but the researchers behind the IPS ung evaluation believe this is the right way to do things.

“There is no doubt that the IPS model works when it comes to getting young people into work and to finish their education,” says researcher Kjetil Frøyland at the Work Research Institute at OsloMet.

Some of the challenges identified in the researchers’ report include:



- Time-consuming. For the employment specialists, it is more time-consuming to work with young people compared to adults.



- Many partners. They do not always speak the same “language”.
- Cross-sector. The health authorities and employment specialists need to improve their cooperation.
- Two systems. Employment specialists find it challenging to navigate between NAV and health services, with different professional traditions, requirements, and goals.
- New arena. Employment specialists believe more must be done to improve collaboration with schools. Schools have systems and regulations that many job specialists are not familiar with.

### School or work?

Thea-Lee Westerberg Östlin from Oslo has always struggled to settle into the school environment.

“I have always had real problems with school, ever since elementary school. I dropped out in year 6, I hardly attended any classes. I have always had the opportunity to go to school but it has been difficult and challenging for me.



*Tonje Kathrine Kretschmer Thue (left) and Thea-Lee Westerberg Östlin often meet at a café to work. Today, they are updating Thea-Lee's CV and look for jobs she can apply for.*

“I actually love subjects like Norwegian and maths, but there is something about school and school work which I cannot deal with,” says Thea-Lee. She is 17.

Even though school was so hard for her, she went on to go to upper secondary school. She started studying health and upbringing.

“At one stage I wanted to become a psychologist. Because I know what it is like to struggle. I wanted to become one of those psychologists who understand children.”

But her health and upbringing course was not quite what she had hoped for. Thea-Lee dropped out of school.

### Preferred to work

Last autumn, Thea-Lee and Tonje met for the first time, and this was actually in school. Tonje Kathrine Kretschmer Thue has been working with IPS and adults since 2021<sup>5</sup>, and with IPS ung since it started up. Tonje works at IPS ung in Oslo city centre.

Together they try to find the path forward for Thea-Lee. One of the main aims for IPS ung in Oslo is to get young people to finish their upper secondary education.

This has turned out to be difficult for Thea-Lee. She has tried a programme which means she spends four days a week working and one day in school. She has been working in a café and a grocery store.

“I would rather work and have something to do than sit at school and concentrate. I enjoyed working in a café. I got to do different things. Every day was different. It kept me motivated,” says Thea-Lee.

### Too much focus on school?

Today, Thea-Lee has no job, but she wants to get back into the labour market. Both she and Tonje believe it will become easier to get a job once Thea-Lee turns 18. That will happen in May.

“We are at some sort of crossroads. All the experiences we gain teach us something new, and then we hope to do better next time,” says Tonje. She feels that they are back in the consideration phase – should Thea-Lee go back to school or should she apply for an ordinary job?

“There is a lot of focus on school at IPS ung Oslo. But not everyone fits into a school situation. I feel it is bordering on hysteria with all this focus on getting everyone to finish upper secondary education. Of course, it is possible to get a job without. It is important to be aware of the opportunities. If you work with young people, you need to build them up and not tear them down,” says Tonje.



*There is often laughter when Tonje Kathrine Kretschmer Thue (left) and Thea-Lee Westerberg Östlin meet.*

### **Tough when you are alone**

Together they try to find a new path for Thea-Lee.

“To begin with, I thought it was a bit strange this thing with Tonje. Because I already have a psychologist. So why Tonje too? But now I have grown very fond of her. If it weren’t for her, I would have dropped out of everything and stayed in bed at home.

“Not only does Tonje do her job, but I can talk to her about anything. She guides me and motivates me. I feel that I can talk to her about whatever and get in touch with her whenever,” says Thea-Lee.

“I don’t see Tonje as a NAV person, but as a guide, psychologist and friend. It will be tough when I have to go out into the world alone,” says Thea-Lee.

“We have been through a lot of things you and I. Of course we will manage, the two of us,” says Tonje.



## Iceland: Work is better than therapy for vulnerable youth

“It pays to invest in people, and we must never give up on our young people,” says Vigdís Jónsdóttir, the CEO of the job rehabilitation centre VIRK in Iceland. Last year, VIRK was one of the signatories to a memorandum of understanding involving a large increase in support for young people in vulnerable situations.

THEME

29.02.2024

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRÍÐASON, PHOTO: VIRK

The other signatories were the Ministry of Labour, the Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise and the Directorate of Labour. A press release at the time said the aim was to prevent young people with mental health issues from being forced out of the labour market.

Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson, the Minister of the Labour Market, has for a long time wanted to improve the opportunities for that group of people, and this is one of the ways of doing it. The government earmarked more than 450 million Icelandic kroner (€3m) over three years for the project.

Every signatory of the memorandum plays their part. The Directorate of Labour hires people to help the young people find jobs. The Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise makes sure the jobs are available and VIRK helps workers with mental health issues find the right job and adapt to the job environment.

### **Must get young people started**

The CEO of VIRK, Vigdís Jónsdóttir, says there have always been worries about young people with mental health issues isolating themselves from the labour market.

“Young people are the future and if we don’t get them started we are in a very difficult situation. We have a lot to gain. If a 20-year-old individual doesn’t work it’s a big blow for society because they have a lot of years left.”

They might have various reasons for not accessing the labour market.

“Drug abuse can be a factor. It is much more common now than before and it can destroy the lives of young people. We also see a lot of research detailing increased discomfort among young people. There is more depression and anxiety than before, which has led to increased medication.”

She adds that in many cases people become isolated when spending a lot of time on their mobiles and computers, playing video games for example.

“And they are also affected by social media, which can cause people to feel bad.”

Jónsdóttir also points out that drug abuse can be a consequence of people having depression or anxiety and therefore struggling socially.

### **Work makes people feel better**

The programme is based on a method known as Individual Placement Support (IPS).

“This has been used around the world and has given the best results, especially for young people with mental health issues. It does not focus on solving that problem, only on finding the right job. Because as soon as they start working, they feel better,” Jónsdóttir says.

And in some cases, the labour market needs to adapt to the individual.

“A good example is people on the autism spectrum, something which we see more of these days. Often there is nothing wrong with these people, but the society is not ready for them.”

In short, when working with IPS, the employment specialists talk to the individuals and hear what kind of job they would like. This is important because it is no good for them to work with something that is of no interest to them. So the employment specialists find jobs based on the young person’s wishes.

“It can be difficult for them to search for jobs and find them, but we can do it. We are cooperating with over 1,500 companies and 350 have a deal with us about being involved. We use these connections. Whether someone wants to work in a theatre or a car repair shop, we can talk to businesses we work with and ask them if they have room, even if it’s only part-time.

“For us, it is really important that these people are not out of touch with the labour market for too long. Their needs must be met and they should have support at work. We don’t just let them go as soon as they start working because there can always be a backlash.

“They might not realise how workplaces work because they’re not used to them. So they need some guidance sometimes, especially if they have been inactive for a long time and have social difficulties.”

### **Not always best to wrap them in cotton wool**

That support can also be a help to the employer.

“Sometimes these individuals are dealing with lifelong mental health challenges. That can create insecurity among employers and coworkers. So the employment specialist can explain the situation to everyone.

“We have so many great success stories involving these people. Many who we thought wouldn’t have a chance of more than a small part-time job all of a sudden are working full time and love it. But sometimes things don’t work out. It’s just how it is.”

Jónsdóttir believes that one of the reasons for Iceland to introduce this special measure are the good results obtained by similar programmes in other Nordic countries.

“It is not always best to wrap these kids in cotton wool and put them through all kinds of treatment for too long. You also have to teach them to be a part of society with the challenges they have.

“Then, sometimes, their confidence grows and they feel that they can take part in this. This is the biggest change in job rehabilitation – to increase the connection with the job sooner, instead of starting with 18 months of psychological therapy. That’s what IPS does.”

Jónsdóttir says that their goal is to give these young people the service they need as quickly as possible.

“We see that IPS has huge effects on our job rehabilitation programme, both for younger and older people. To connect individuals with the labour market straight away really does a lot.

“We have to teach them to live with their difficulties and give them tools that make them able to work despite them. For example, we teach them how to maintain close contact with work, because that can be the most important contact they have.”

VIRK’s involvement has been a big success. Normally, 2,500 people use their services at any given time and most of them are not able to work when they join. 80 per cent of the ones who go through their programme end up finding jobs.

Jónsdóttir says this has contributed to fewer people on disability benefits, also among young people.





## Immigrants struggle to find work in the Nordics despite labour shortages

Many immigrants in Nordic countries are left without jobs, despite labour shortages. The Finnish company Snellman has a lot of experience with hiring immigrants. “Immigrants are very keen on getting a job and they are keen workers. They are loyal employees,” says head of HR Ann-Marie Eklund.

NEWS

29.02.2024

TEXT: LINE SCHEISTRØEN, PHOTO: SNELLMAN

“We have a lot of experience with hiring people with a foreign background. It has become a natural thing for us to do. It could be because the Jakobstad region is bilingual, with Finnish and Swedish, and that we at Snellman are used to speaking both languages,” head of HR Ann-Marie Eklund tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

Eklund was one of the participants during the webinar “Why should you (not) hire refugees and immigrants?”, hosted by the Nordic Welfare Centre. They say the issue creates a lot of interest. More than 300 people signed up to the webinar.

### Loyal employees

14 per cent of Snellman meat processing plant’s nearly 1,400 employees have a foreign background. They represent 40 nationalities.

“The immigrants are very keen on getting a job and they are keen workers. They are loyal employees. We have labour shortages here in Osterbothnia, so it is very important to attract foreign labour to our region. In the workplace, this creates an understanding of other cultures. Employees who speak different languages can come in handy when we communicate with customers,” says Eklund.



*The webinar was chaired by Kaisa Kepsu, senior advisor at the Nordic Welfare Centre, here in conversation with Karin Heri, Anna Engedal Jacobsen and Ahmed Abdirahman. Photo: Nordregio.*

### **The important language**

In order to work in this Finnish workplace, you normally need to speak three languages – Finnish, Swedish and English. This is required partly because the employer needs to be sure the workers can understand and talk about hygiene, health and safety.

When Ukrainian refugees knocked on the door to ask for jobs, it created a challenge for the company, explains the head of HR.

“We really wanted to help, but the language barriers were challenging. The Ukrainian refugees who came knew little English. In order to inform them about important health and hygiene issues, we got help from employees who could speak Russian and Ukrainian.”

Eklund says that the company demands that employees learn languages as they go along. They have also held in-house language courses.

### **What advice would you give to employers who wonder whether they should dare employ immigrants?**

“See each individual person when recruiting and during the job interview. Focus on the person’s experiences and what they can bring to the company, regardless of their background.

“Make sure people have the correct work permits and passports. Create clear induction models and use guides to make the introduction to work tasks easier. Create a socially inclusive work environment, for instance by organising social events. In a workplace, it is important to also remember that everyone needs to be seen and heard,” says Eklund.

### **With employer glasses on**

During the webinar, Nordregio researchers Rebecca Cavicchia and Anna Berlina presented findings from the aptly titled report “Employers’ perspectives on hiring immigrants - Experiences from Nordic countries.”

The researchers have been looking at employers’ attitudes to hiring immigrants. They have gathered and studied existing research and also interviewed eight employers in Finland, Sweden, Iceland and Norway.



*Nordregio researchers Rebecca Cavicchia (left) and Anna Berlina hope the report can inspire employers to think innovatively when recruiting workers. Photo: Nordregio.*

The aim was to discover which challenges employers face and to find solutions and measures that can lead to more inclusive recruitment. They also highlighted employers’ role and responsibility for improving the integration of immigrants in the labour market.

### **Many without a job**

The Nordic region has seen a considerable rise in immigration, especially since the 2015 refugee crisis and in the wake of Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Today, around 3.5 million immigrants live in the Nordics.

But even though there are high levels of labour shortages, many immigrants remain outside of the labour market. Several studies show that it is hard for refugees and immigrants to find jobs, especially for women, people with low or no education or non-EU immigrants.

### **Helping employers**

Jobbentrén is a Swedish company that helps businesses employ more people with a foreign background. Mark Ahlenius, Jobbentrén’s founder, took part in the webinar. He encouraged employers to dare to think innovatively.

“Nearly one-third of Sweden’s labour market is made up of people with immigrant backgrounds. Companies who see them are tomorrow’s winners,” said Ahlenius.

He highlighted several advantages to hiring immigrants.



“In our experience, if unemployed immigrants get jobs, they often stay for longer in that position and remain loyal to the company,” he said.

### “Just try”

The employers interviewed by the Nordregio researchers for the report also underline that they mostly have positive experiences with hiring immigrants. They encourage other employers to “just try it” and to “not be afraid” of failure.

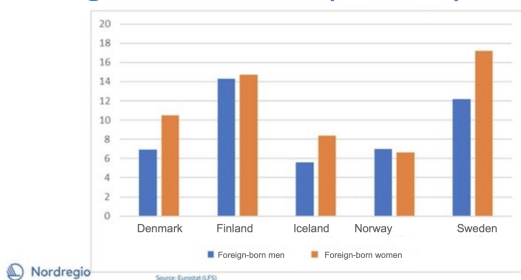
“The key is to dare to give it a try. Several companies say the recruitment and integration of immigrants to the workplace has been easier than they expected,” says researcher Anna Berlina at Nordregio.

### Encourages some creativity

The employers say there are both benefits and challenges to hiring immigrants.

“The benefits are diversity, new knowledge, improved customer service and increased tolerance among employees. And the company also gains access to a larger labour pool,” says Rebecca Cavicchia, a Nordregio researcher.

### Unemployment is usually higher among foreign-born women (Q3 2023)



*Many immigrants lack jobs. Unemployment is highest among women. (Source: Nordregio/Eurostat)*

Employers say it can be difficult to obtain work permits for non-EU immigrants and that they experience challenges with the language and cultural differences.

The researchers list some strategies for addressing the challenges:

- Language training
- Promoting cultural awareness and sensibilities
- Positive attitude to diversity, including in hiring strategies
- Promoting an understanding of rules, values and norms in Nordic workplaces
- Adjusting expectations to language skills
- Creative approaches to minimise the challenges

### Too stringent language requirements?

Language is a common challenge. Many immigrants fail in interviews because their language skills are not good enough.

Anna Engedal Jacobsen works with international recruitment and integration in Denmark. She encourages employers to not allow language barriers stop them from hiring immigrants. Engedal Jacobsen underlines that the workplace is one of the best venues in which to learn a language.

“There is a big difference between learning a language in a school setting and learning a language while working,” she told the webinar.

Karin Heri, Country Director at Tent Partnership for Refugees in Sweden, has seen how employers tend to set language requirements too high during the hiring process.

“Job interviews usually involve a more advanced Swedish than what the job requires. We can help businesses realise that a worker can learn the language while working. You can make a plan for which language levels are acceptable at the start of a contract and then create goals for further language training. You could for instance identify a goal for which language level the employee should reach within one year,” said Heri.



# Nordic researchers want political action on NEETs

More and more young people in the Nordics are not in education or employment. Not enough is done to help young people facing extra challenges, argue Nordic researchers.

THEME

29.02.2024

TEXT: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

“Around 100,000 young people are not in employment or education. That is far too many,” said Tonje Brenna, Norway’s Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion at the beginning of February this year.

The minister told the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration NAV: Prioritise this group in the coming year. The government expects more young people to be in work at the end of 2024.

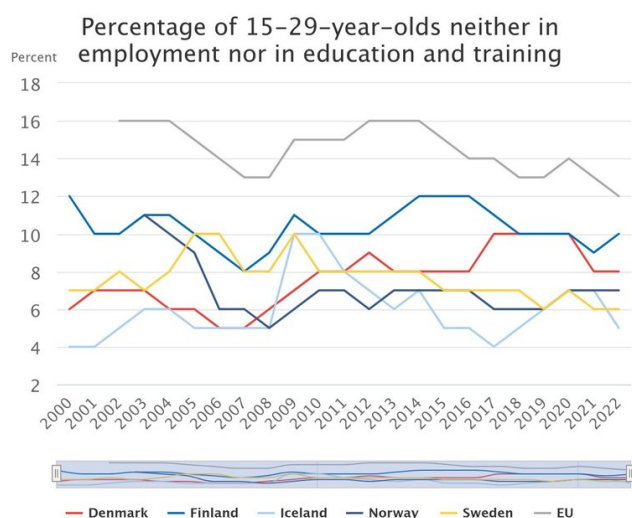
Brenna is not the first, and probably not the last, Norwegian minister of labour to worry about too many young people not being in education or employment. If it is any comfort, she is also not the only minister of labour in the Nordic region who has this challenge in her in-tray.

What she said could as easily have been said by ministers in Finland, Sweden, Iceland or Denmark. All of the Nordic countries have too many young people who are not in education or work. They remain outside what we consider to be “normal”, and they struggle to get inside.

### Outside forever?

There is a name for this category: NEET – not in education, employment or training. The group covers young people aged 15 to 29.

The EU average of NEETs has stood at 12 per cent in recent years. All of the Nordic countries are below that average. Finland has the largest proportion of NEETS at around 10 per cent, while Iceland, Norway and Sweden stand at around 5 to 6 per cent.



*The Nordic countries are below average, and have been since the year 2000. Source: Nordic Statistics database*

Several studies have shown that NEET youths find it particularly difficult to move on, either to a classroom or to become part of the labour market.

### It is not free!

Young people remaining outsiders have considerable consequences, for the individual of course, but also for the rest of society.

For society as a whole, it means less value creation, increased public expenditure and more pressure on the health and legal systems.

There are many calculations and big numbers. Let us look at one example from Norway, and the calculated loss to society of a 19-year-old remaining excluded from the labour market until they are 62. The lost value creation is an estimated 15.9 million Norwegian kroner (€1.4m). On top of that come expenses in the wake of being on the outside – like benefits.

The price of exclusion can become high for the individual too. With no income, you can afford little. That impacts how you live and eat, and which activities you can participate in. Exclusion often leads to loneliness as well as poor physical and mental health.

### More people with mental health issues

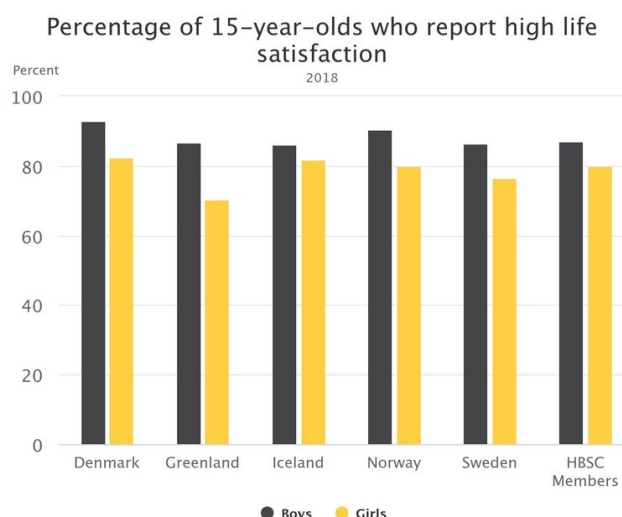
Let there be no doubt – Norwegian youths are largely doing well. Most handle school and studies well, transitioning smoothly into work and adult life.

But in the last few decades, Nordic and European studies have shown an increase in mental health issues, especially among young girls.

There is no one simple explanation for this increase. One reason is more openness around mental health. Changes in diagnostic practices and support services for young people may also have influenced this trend.

However, separate youth surveys have shown that an increasing number of young people are experiencing school-related stress and body image pressure. They say they worry and feel depressed. Many describe a lack of control and a life that is difficult to navigate.

Poor mental health is one of many reasons why many struggle to succeed with education and access to the labour market.



*Nordic youth are mainly happy with life, surveys show. Source: Nordic Statistics database*

Yet there are other reasons for exclusion, like having foreign heritage, low levels of education (including among parents), physical handicaps and poor health, poor self-confidence and behavioural problems, poor childhood environments, poor school results and previous periods of unemployment.

### “A challenge with no solution”

It is not like all ministers of labour before Tonje Brenna and her Nordic colleagues have been sat twiddling their thumbs and letting this happen. They, and the current ministers, have put young, excluded people on the agenda.



The Nordic countries have also instigated a range of measures, some of which have led to good results. Others less so.

During the 2022 Norwegian Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Work Research Institute (AFI) at the Oslo Metropolitan University was commissioned to gather knowledge on how to successfully include vulnerable youths. With good help from Nordic research colleagues, this resulted in the AFI report “Inclusion of young people in school, work and society – a compilation of knowledge from Nordic research”.

The authors also wrote an opinion piece titled “More and more young people fall outside of education and work. Why do we allow this to happen?”. The piece was signed Anne Leseth, Kjetil Frøyland, Andreea Alecu, Jannike Ballo and Talieh Sadegi.

The researchers argued far too little was being done to help young people who face extra challenges.

“Despite a range of measures in the Nordic welfare states across several years, exclusion among young people still appears to be a challenge with no solution,” they wrote.

### **Some things work!**

The report says there are some common denominators for which activities and measures work best. The most effective measures include:

- Tailored measures and close follow-up
- Cooperation between schools, health services, employment authorities and employers
- Being treated as a normal person



*More and more young people in Nordic countries feel that school is not for them. Photo: Yadid Levy/norden.org*

“Helping vulnerable youths means investing time, money and humanity. You must work with your own understanding, prejudices and stereotypes and be innovative when it comes to coordinating services. Investing

more in this group of young people can potentially produce great returns for the individual and for society as a whole. “For the young people, this is first and foremost about improved quality of life. For society as a whole, it is about improving public health and a well-functioning labour market,” the researchers wrote in their opinion piece.

### **Encouraging politicians to take action**

Measures or programmes that are similar to ordinary employment give the best results when it comes to workplace inclusion. “Individual Placement and Support” (IPS) is considered to be a good tool for helping young people who face mental challenges when looking for work.

The researchers point out that ordinary public employment services, wage subsidies and qualification activities yield more mixed results. Youth guarantees are also not the best tool, according to the researchers, at least not for including young people who are the furthest from the labour market.

“With a coherent Nordic research foundation behind us, it is worth asking how long politicians can dare to refrain from taking necessary action. Young people carry opportunities for a better future within themselves. We need greater recognition of their resources and capacities rather than their problems,” write the researchers.



## Considerable local differences in Sweden's efforts for NEETs

Swedish municipalities have very different approaches to how they help more young people with social inclusion, according to a survey that also includes examples of successful measures. Meanwhile, a Nordic project is working to improve young people's mental health – one of the biggest risk factors for ending up in social exclusion.

THEME

29.02.2024

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: LINNEA BENGTTSSON

For nearly two decades now, strategic efforts have been underway in Sweden aimed at reducing the number of young people who are not in employment or education. Despite progress on several fronts, some 140,000 people aged 16 to 29 have spent more than one year without working or studying according to MUCF, the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society.

“The correct priority is not big measures late in the day, but smaller measures early on, if fewer young people are to avoid social exclusion.”

The statement comes from Lena Nyberg, the MUCF General Director and former Ombudsman for Children, during a conversation with the Nordic Labour Journal.

### Municipalities' role and responsibility

Swedish municipalities have a so-called activity responsibility, known as KAA. This means municipalities "are obliged to identify and offer measures for young people under 20 who are not in upper secondary education or any equivalent education."

It is also common for municipalities to offer measures to young adults over the age of 20 who are neither employed nor studying. However, there has been a lack of current analysis of the differences in measures at the municipal level for both young people under and over 20 years old, according to MUCF.

Late last year, the authority published a report focusing on three aspects:

- to investigate the differences on a municipal level in the number of young people who are not working or studying
- to investigate differences in how municipalities work with this group
- to investigate the local efforts' success factors and challenges

The report is based on registry data from Statistics Sweden and survey responses from 191 of Sweden's 290 municipalities. Its title is *Fokus 23 – Olika villkor för etablering. Lokala förutsättningar och stöd till unga som varken arbetar eller studerar* (Focus 23 – Different conditions for social inclusion. Local preconditions and support for young people who are neither working nor studying). It starts with an analysis.

"As an authority, we are tasked by the government to work towards achieving the goals laid out in youth and civil society policies," says Lena Nyberg.

### Equity shortcomings

*Fokus 23* has compiled figures showing that support for young people in social exclusion depends on where in Sweden they live. There are large differences between municipalities, so large that "the municipality with the highest proportion of young people neither working nor studying is nearly four times that of the municipalities with the lowest proportion".

The average proportion of young people aged 16 to 29 who are not working or in education across all of Sweden's municipalities is 8.5 per cent. The lowest proportion is 4.8 per cent and the highest is 16.7 per cent.

"We know that measures make a difference and that the local level plays a crucial role when it comes to young people's opportunities for social inclusion. Now, we also know that things are very different from municipality to municipality," says Lena Nyberg.

The differences between municipalities stem not only from which measures they offer but also the level of cooperation – within the municipality and with other stakeholders like the Public Employment Service, the health care sector, the Social Insurance Agency, businesses and companies.

The lack of equality is particularly pronounced for young people who have turned 20, according to the report.

### More losses – for many

Since the report was published towards the end of last year, more families of young people living in social exclusion have contacted MUCF. They explain how the exclusion often affects the whole family.

"Parents, grandparents and others have told us about how this affects people's health, social life and economy," says Lena Nyberg.

Society as a whole also stands to lose out economically, according to Nyberg.

"We highlight the risk of significant economic cost for society if these problems are not addressed at an early stage. The further away from the labour market you are, the larger the risk of long-term unemployment."

### Measures that bring results

Success factors outlined in *Fokus 23* are based on interviews with nine different municipalities.

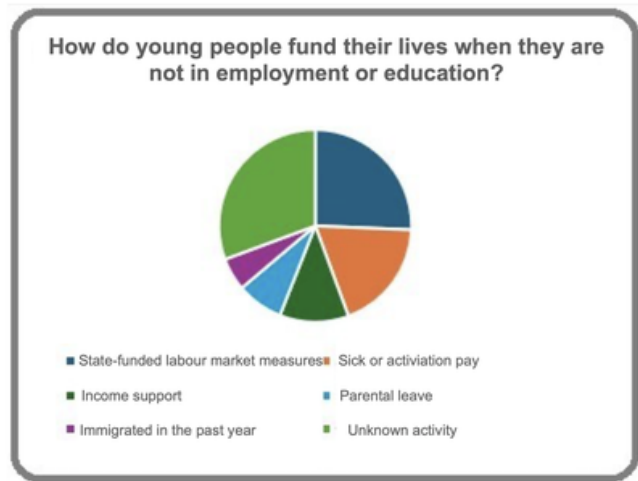
The interviews unveiled several factors for successful local measures that can reduce the number of young people in social exclusion. Some of them include:

- to build businesses and structures that create conditions for long-term work with young people who are outside of employment and education based on their individual needs for support
- engaging with young people in a way that builds trust
- creating collaboration platforms to enable young people to access coordinated support from multiple stakeholders
- providing more preventative interventions to facilitate step-by-step transitions for young people who are far from employment and education

### Different measures needed for mixed group

*Fokus 23* underlines that young people not in education or employment is far from a homogenous group. Some have signed up with the Public Employment Service, others are on sick leave while around one-third have unknown employment and livelihood status. This includes the so-called "home sitters" whose number is unknown.





“Since we know that the group is so heterogeneous, we also know that individual support tailored to their own needs makes a big difference,” says Lena Nyberg.

However, knowledge and information about the target group is scattered and to a certain extent hard to access. This makes it harder to create a comprehensive understanding of the knowledge base for people who work with this group on local, regional and national levels, according to *Fokus 23*, which goes on to say:

“It is crucial to increase accessibility to relevant knowledge about the target group and in particular knowledge about successful working methods. This is particularly important because those who work with the target group need good knowledge of the various challenges and conditions faced by the young people in order to create individually tailored support.”

#### Young people in the Nordics a focus for 2024

Sweden holds the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers this year, and with that also the chairmanship of NORD-*BUK*, the Council’s Committee for Children and Young People.

This has allowed MUCF to apply for support for a project that will focus on young people’s mental health and social inclusion in the Nordic countries.

A group of young people and experts will begin work on the project soon.

“All the Nordic countries struggle with this issue and we will use methods where young people are heard. The project has a clear youth perspective where young people get to participate and influence the outcomes, and it also aims to highlight the challenges around young people’s mental health,” says Lena Nyberg.

The project will culminate in a final conference in Stockholm this autumn, where consolidated knowledge and input from across the Nordic region will be presented.

“It will involve a limited but distinguished group of decision-makers at the political or administrative level. These are individuals who are well-informed and capable of making a difference.”

#### State support is coming

The Swedish government recently decided to allocate over 1.5 billion Swedish kronor (€134m) for measures dealing with mental health and suicide prevention in 2024.

In a written response to the Nordic Labour Journal, the Minister of Social Affairs Jakob Forssmed says:

“Few issues are as important as the work for improved mental health. The government’s ambitions are clear – preventive and facilitating efforts should be strengthened, the number of suicides should decrease, and care and support for people with mental illness should become more accessible and equal.

“An important part of the work is to prepare the ground for the relevant people to develop efforts in the field of mental health and suicide prevention. As part of this, the state and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions have reached an agreement on measures for mental health and suicide prevention for 2024, totalling 1,560,000,000 Swedish kronor, with the majority of the funds allocated to municipalities and regions.

“As part of the agreement, 803 million Swedish kronor is earmarked for work with the mental health of children and young people. This includes funds to reduce waiting times for child and adolescent psychiatric care and strengthen primary care.

“The agreement is a continuation of the work that the parties have been conducting since 2012, aiming to develop efforts in the field of mental health and suicide prevention.”





## Threats to Swedish social service workers: New inquiry proposes stricter legislation

Threats and harassment against public officials in Sweden are commonplace and on the rise. This has major consequences for individual employees and risks undermining democracy in the long term. A new public inquiry proposes stricter penalties for violence towards public officials as well as making it a crime to insult public officials.

NEWS

29.02.2024

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN

Social workers working closely with vulnerable people might face threats and violence, that is nothing new. But a new Swedish inquiry warns that the threat level has risen considerably. According to the inquiry "Stronger protection for public officials against violence, threats and harassment, SOU 2024:1", 48 per cent of social workers have been exposed to threats or violence in the past 12 months.

Everyday life became more dangerous and unsafe for social workers operating in vulnerable areas dealing with children and young people when, a few years ago, rumours emerged that Swedish social services were kidnapping children.

A viral disinformation campaign in social media started in the autumn of 2021 and grew through 2022 and 2023. This also led to demonstrations against Swedish social services both in Sweden and abroad.

Similar campaigns have been carried out against other Nordic countries too, including Norway. In India the criticism became so widespread that a Bollywood film was made, featuring one of the country's most famous female actors, called "Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway", with the subtitle "A Woman's Fight against a Nation."



*A film poster for the Indian film "Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway". Photo: Zee Studios/Emmay Entertainment.*

"Since the disinformation campaign, we clearly see that the threat level has worsened for those working with children and young people. Our social care surveys also show how the situation has gradually deteriorated since 2010.

"There is a comprehensive problem related to threats and violence to people working in roles of authority, and in institutions," says Fredrik Hjulström, head of social policy at the Union for Professionals, Akademikerförbundet SSR.



*Fredrik Hjulström, head of social policy at the Union for Professionals, Akademikerförbundet SSR.. Photo: SSR.*

Akademikerförbundet SSR is the trade union for social workers, among others. People working in authority roles can have a significant influence on people's lives. They assess whether children need to be taken into custody, whether young people need to be forcibly placed into residential care or whether substance abuse has become so serious that involuntary measures are necessary.

They work closely with vulnerable people and might face threats, violence and harassment on a regular basis.

"We hear about everything from violence and threats to more hidden threats like 'I have information about you and I know where you live and where your children go to nursery' and everything in between. But few are willing to step forward and talk about it because it might increase the threat level," explains Fredrik Hjulström.

He thinks many social workers have got used to milder threats and perhaps tell their immediate boss but nothing more. If there is more direct violence or clearer threats, the victim in most cases gets support from their employer.

"Reporting incidents to the police is more difficult. If the person themselves file a report, their information becomes known and many of our members do not want to be in that database," he says.

It is also often the youngest social workers who are in the toughest jobs. The challenging work environment has made more experienced social workers apply for other positions away from working with children and young people in vulnerable areas.

Previously, a lot of professional experience was required to secure the most attractive positions. Today, this is not the case; instead, the positions are filled with young social workers who have recently graduated from college.

"The harder the situation is in a municipality, the more of the social workers are young and inexperienced. The salary is also important. Many municipalities pay newly hired people well, which makes the more experienced social workers feel overlooked," says Fredrik Hjulström.

### **Fear can affect the exercise of authority**

"We are increasingly concerned about how our members in social services are subjected to dreadful slander and outright threats," wrote Akademikerförbundet SSR's chair Heike Erkens in an opinion piece in Svenska Dagbladet on 31 October 2023.

At the same time, she pointed out that as many as 60 per cent of social workers in vulnerable areas had been subjected to threats, which in turn had affected their professional practice.

"Among those working with involuntary measures, 4 per cent of respondents in our social worker surveys have reported avoiding acting in accordance with the Care of Young Persons Act (LVU) or the Care of Substance Abusers Act (LVM) because they have been afraid.

"In vulnerable areas, 7 per cent have avoided taking action. It is also important to remember that inadequate resources are even more often cited as a reason for not taking action," says Fredrik Hjulström.

### **Insults can become a crime**

The aim of the inquiry "Stronger protection for public employees against violence, threats and harassment", SOU 2024:1, is to address the growing threat faced by many in the public sector who have close contact with clients.

Based on a broad range of evidence from reports and interviews, the investigators have concluded that within the entire field of public administration people are vulnerable to vi-

olence, threats, and harassment. It is extensive and it is increasing.

Those most affected are people with duties involving exercising authority, meaning decisions that can have significant effects on individuals. Examples include law enforcement agencies, as well as supervisors and those who have a deciding vote on permits, compensations and grants. The most vulnerable are the officials who have extensive and close contact with the public and clients.



*John Ahlberk, Director General of the Swedish Accident Investigation Board, led the inquiry on better protection for public employees. Photo: Peter Knutson, SHK.*

The inquiry concludes that more support is needed for public employees against violence, threats and harassment. It proposes increased penalties for threats and violence against public officials, as well as making insulting public servants a crime.

The inquiry also calls for less exposure of public servants' names in decisions and other actions that document measures, as well as stronger protection of information about public servants and their families.

The inquiry "Stronger protection for public employees against violence, threats and harassment" is still out for consultation, but the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) is mainly positive and Fredrik Hjulström would also like to see stronger protection of members.

"One difficult issue is to anonymise decisions, and we are not advocates for that. Those who are affected by a decision have the right to know who made that decision and on what basis. In order to succeed with social work it is impossible to be anonymous.

"An authority is made up of individuals and if you don't dare to come forward, we have a problem. Then the threats against officials become a threat against the system," he says.

### **Cooperation between employers and trade unions**

Trade unions and the employers' organisation SALAR already cooperate to increase knowledge about threats and violence in the social care sector and to spread knowledge about what is being done to improve the work environment in the sector. There is a webcast which focuses on threats and violence and how employers and officials can deal with it.

"Working with vulnerable people is hard, and people in the sector know it. Many are good at their jobs, but sometimes there can be too much pressure. We did see the challenges in the wake of the disinformation campaign and noticed how mistrust in social services increased.

"That is when it becomes particularly important to be visible in the community and not communicate less – but more. It is very important to be present in the community and to foster dialogue," says Karin Falck, an administrator at SALAR's social services section who works with the social partners in order to create joint information material.

She paints a similar picture of threats and violence in the social care sector to Fredrik Hjulström and highlights the problem of unauthorised pressure as a way to try to influence social services decisions.

"We want unauthorised pressure to become a crime, and the authority or employer should be the ones to report violence or threats to the police – not the individual official," says Karin Falck.

She also highlights the problem of high turnover figures within the sector.

"Many young people work with the most vulnerable clients, but we know that long experience in the profession is a protective factor," she says.

There is already work being done in several of the most vulnerable areas to get staff to stay on and to prevent threats and violence. Good examples are being communicated to the municipalities. How are the localities? How do you create stability in the group and how can management provide support?

Local cooperation is important, for example with the police, and it is crucial to have a presence in vulnerable areas. Many municipalities organise listening meetings and initiate conversations in vulnerable areas. Good things are happening, but we do not hear about them, she says.

A new social services law which will emphasise preventative work comes into effect on 1 July 2025. Many municipalities are already gearing up for the new development of social services. Extra resources have been promised.

"Work needs to be done that prevents segregation and creates the most equal chances possible for children and young people. Those at risk of entering into criminal activities need to be given the chance to integrate into society instead. It is

important to have a greater vision and for the social services sector to become a long-term part of societal development, says Karin Falck.

# Unexpected delay of the EU platform directive

There is a race against time to land the EU directive on platform work. In December, it looked like the issue was being solved, but then nearly half of the member states' governments gave it a thumbs-down, including the Finnish and Swedish ones.

NEWS

29.02.2024

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EDITOR EU & ARBETSRÄTT

They did not want to accept the compromise reached by negotiators from the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers. A new compromise was reached – but four countries are still blocking the directive.

The background to the Commission's directive proposal is that platform companies typically treat food delivery workers and other platform workers as self-employed. However, according to the Commission, the platforms often control platform workers' conditions to such an extent that they should be classified as employees and covered by the protective rules of labour law.

The directive's purpose is therefore to create mechanisms to make it easier for these workers to be recognised as employees.

The directive proposal listed five criteria that typically characterise a regular employment relationship. If two or more of these applied to a platform worker's situation, the starting point would be that he or she should be considered to be an employee. If the platform considered this to be incorrect, it would have to provide sufficient evidence to prove the worker was in fact self-employed.

## Two rejected proposals

This list of criteria remained in the compromise reached between the Parliament and the Council of Ministers in December. Normally, it is then a pure formality to get the compromise adopted by both institutions. In this case, however, two such agreements have already been rejected.

This disagreement centres on whether the EU or member states should decide where to draw the line between employee and self-employed. Throughout the years, member states – not least those in the Nordic region – have been careful to retain the right to decide who should be covered by their national labour law.

Consequently, this has been the major sticking point also in the negotiations on the platform directive. While the proposal does not contain an explicit definition of who is considered an employee, for some the mere fact that it lists circumstances to be considered goes too far.

## The list was deleted

In the second compromise negotiated in early February, the list has indeed been removed. Now, it simply states that the relationship between a platform and a platform worker should be considered to be an employment relationship if there are "facts" indicating that the platform exercises direction and control over the work. The specific nature of these unspecified facts is therefore left for the member states to determine.

Finland and Sweden are now playing along, but Estonia, France, Greece and Germany have notified that they are still not content. Yet there has not yet been any formal vote on the issue, and right now, fevered lobbying is going on to get enough countries on board.

The question is what else would be required for them to change their minds. Another question is whether the other member states or the Parliament would accept it if the directive were to be further diluted. Soon it will also be too late to rush additional proposals through the Parliament before the June election, when the political landscape could become very different.





## Karen Ellemann: All of the Nordics in Nato “positive in every way”

The Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers believes Nordic cooperation will be even stronger when all of the Nordic countries are Nato members. But during the Arctic Frontiers conference in Tromsø, Karen Ellemann repeated that a council of defence ministers is not presently being planned.

NEWS

05.02.2024

TEXT: LARS BEVANGER, PHOTO: DAVID JENSEN/ARCTIC FRONTIERS

“There is little doubt that having all the Nordics as members of Nato is a good development in a time when the geopolitical situation demands stronger defence. A stronger Nordic region that is ready to defend itself and each other is positive in every way,” the Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers told the Nordic Labour Journal when we met her during the Arctic Frontiers conference in Tromsø during the last week of January.

She had finally arrived after extreme weather “Ingunn” had stopped her and many other participants’ planes and done much damage in the Northern parts of Norway. A reminder that the weather in this part of the world does not make concessions to anyone.



*Arctic Frontiers is an annual conference gathering leaders, scientists, indigenous peoples' representatives and local*

*politicians to discuss all things Arctic. Photo: David Jensen/Arctic Frontiers.*

The annual Arctic Frontiers conference gathers leaders, scientists, indigenous peoples' representatives and local politicians from nearly all of the Arctic nations to debate challenges surrounding geopolitics, climate, resource extraction and the green transition. Russia has not participated on an official level since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

### **Need to tighten the guy ropes**

"All the challenges that we are now facing make it even clearer how important it is to stand together and deliver on all the initiatives that are needed to secure success with the green transition and with becoming an even more integrated region," says Karen Ellemann.

"With such a clear vision for the whole of the Nordic region, we must tighten the guy ropes and be conscious of which initiatives are needed. This is happening in the Nordic Council of Ministers, but the fact that the Nordics are now also so strong within Nato is also a very important and positive development."

### **No longer separate security policies**

At the opening of Arctic Frontiers, Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs Espen Barth Eide indicated that defence and security cooperation could now become a theme for the Nordic Council of Ministers.



*Esen Barth Eide, Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Photo: David Jensen/Arctic Frontiers.*

"The Nordic Council of Ministers is a great and important institution which long was prohibited from dealing with these issues. While we were socially, economically, politically close, we were very different in security policies.

"That's gone. So, there is a new opportunity for cooperating on these crucial issues of security among the Nordic members of the Arctic community," said Espen Barth Eide.

### **Mandate to deliver on everything but defence**

The Nordic Labour Journal asked Karen Ellemann whether this means that a Nordic council of defence ministers could now become relevant. But even though she agrees that the situation totally changes once all the Nordic countries are Nato members, the time is still not ripe for such a council of ministers.

"There is of course a debate about how to secure this type of defence cooperation. But right now, our mandate rests with what was written in the Helsinki Treaty. And after all, it is important to remember that the Nordic Council of Ministers' mandate can deliver on everything *around* defence and security policies – and all this is of course more relevant than ever," says Ellemann.

In addition to Nato cooperation, the Nordic countries cooperate on defence through The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO). The defence alliance seeks to "strengthen the participants' national defence, explore common synergies and facilitate efficient common solutions".?

### **Seven out of eight Arctic nations in Nato**

When Sweden as the last Nordic country most probably gains Nato membership shortly, all the Arctic nations will also be members of the same defence alliance – except Russia.

Pretty much all official political cooperation between Russia and the rest of the Arctic nations ceased after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The Arctic Council is the main body for this cooperation, and it continues work without participation from Russia – the largest out of the eight Arctic nations. Norway holds the chairship of the Arctic Council until 2025.



*Jonas Gahr Støre, Norwegian Prime Minister. Photo: David Jensen/Arctic Frontiers.*

"Arctic issues are critical – not only for us living in the Arctic but for the whole world. We are maintaining the work of the Arctic Council; it would not serve anybody's purpose to close



it down,” Norway’s Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre told the Nordic Labour Journal.

**Arctic challenges a golden opportunity for the Nordic region**

Although the Arctic Council is central to Arctic cooperation, Karen Ellemann believes the challenges facing the Arctic also represent a golden opportunity for the Nordic cooperation. It is now that we can show what is really possible, especially when it comes to climate change, she argues.

Global warming is happening nearly four times faster in the Arctic compared to the global average.

“The Arctic region is where climate change really shows how badly it’s going. This definitely gives us a renewed focus because that is where we can actually make an impact when we join our forces. And it supplements what is going on in the Arctic Council,” says Karen Ellemann.



# Aiming for full mobility in the Nordic region's largest labour market

The Øresund Bridge is 25 next year, yet despite the good commuting opportunities it offers there is still a way to go before the Nordic's largest labour market is fully integrated. This year, Sweden holds the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, and greater mobility in the Nordic region is a top priority.

THEME

02.02.2024

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: JOHAN WESSMAN, NEWS ØRESUND

Win-win. The English expression could be heard repeatedly during this year's first Øresund Talks 2024 conference, which was held recently in Copenhagen. The theme was "The Potential in the Nordic region's largest labour market". The organiser was The Øresund Bridge, whose motto is "Together we build bridges".

The debate centred around the question of why it is still harder to commute between Copenhagen and Malmö than between Copenhagen and Roskilde or between Malmö and Lund, when both countries have so much to gain from a common labour market.

In real terms, this could amount to billions in profit for the two Nordic countries. According to calculations made by Greater Copenhagen, a fully integrated labour market across Øresund could result in an annual profit of up to 2.9 billion Danish Kroner (€389m, 2019 figures) for the Swedish and Danish economies combined.

## Project underway

The OECD and the European Commission's Directorate General for Structural Reform Support (GD REFORM) have been commissioned by the Capital Region of Denmark to inves-

tigate how labour market integration in the Öresund region can be improved.

Tilde Ussing from the OECD joined the conference online to talk about issues that might create barriers to labour market integration in a border region like the Öresund region. She mentioned regulations for working from home, pensions and digital accessibility, as well as regulations for residence and work permits.

Tilde Ussing also said that while the infrastructure in the Öresund region is present, there is a labour shortage on the Danish side despite the existence of many jobseekers living within commuting distance from Denmark's capital region.

In Skåne in southern Sweden, some 61,400 jobseekers were registered with the Swedish Public Employment Service. Many of them are non-EU citizens, which can be a deal breaker when it comes to commuting across the border between Denmark and Sweden.

### 15 requests a week

Maria Bergström and Peter Karancsi represent the Swedish Public Employment Service at Öresunddirekt's Malmö offices. Both are Eures advisors and specialists in international recruitment.

"We get a considerable amount of requests from non-EU citizens with Swedish residency permits who have been offered jobs in Denmark or who want to explore the possibilities of working across the strait. We get around 15 of these a week," Maria Bergström tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

She understands that jobseekers might feel frustrated when they cannot accept a job 30 minutes away because of existing regulations between Sweden and Denmark, while at the same time, there is talk of an integrated labour market and the vision that the Nordic region should become the world's most integrated region by 2030.

"Many third-country citizens who get in touch have no chance of fulfilling the Danish rules for obtaining a Danish work permit. The jobs they apply for are not part of the Positive Lists [a list of professions experiencing a shortage of qualified professionals in Denmark] – they want to work in the service sector – in restaurants and hotels. These jobs also do not pay enough to meet Danish demands," says Maria Bergström.

She refers to Danish labour market regulations for third-country citizens. The Nordic Labour Journal has written about these regulations here.

"It is difficult on many levels that high demands prevent people from being hired," says Maria Bergström.

"First and foremost for the individual person of course. But it is also hard for Danish employers, who cannot fill their vacancies."

Perhaps a bilateral agreement between Sweden and Denmark could help more people get work on the other side of the strait, wonders Maria Bergström.

"A solution like that ought to be a win-win for both countries."

### Danish employers need more people

There is a considerable labour shortage in Denmark and it will remain for several years to come. Fresh figures from Danish Industry (DI) the country's largest industry organisation, show that half of all Danish companies will suffer from labour shortages until 2030.

Among the employers, one of the most popular measures to fix the shortage is to do more to hire more foreign workers, writes DI.

### Red tape worries employers

Greater Copenhagen – a Danish-Swedish political collaboration that aims to make the region "a global centre for growth, sustainable solutions and innovation" – is driving business policy issues. The members count 85 municipalities and four regions on both the Danish and Swedish sides.



*Tue David Bak, CEO of Greater Copenhagen. Photo: Thea Wiborg/News Øresund.*

"Danish employers are very positive to labour from Sweden. But the outdated Öresund Agreement, which regulates taxes and pensions for those commuting across the strait, poses problems," says Tue David Bak, CEO of Greater Copenhagen.

"Employers are punished economically, for instance, when employees work from home, due to the rules governing the payment of preliminary taxes. This has a deterrent effect, which is why the revision of the Öresund Agreement must be completed now. The tax and pension regulations in the agreement that make things difficult for employees pose a problem for employers too, because they complicate the recruitment process."

"It is also important for Danish employers that it becomes easier for third-country citizens to accept jobs across the border," says Tue David Bak.

### Increased integration a top priority

On 1 January, Sweden took over the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Jessika Roswall, the Swedish Minister for Nordic Cooperation (the Moderate Party) tells the Nordic Labour Journal in an e-mail:

"There is significant potential in the Öresund region, and of course, I want to see a fully integrated Danish-Swedish labour market in the region. This would benefit not only individuals or companies. It creates tax revenues for Denmark and Sweden, attracts investors and entrepreneurs and enhances competitiveness."

What the Nordic Council of Ministers has planned in terms of concrete action is not yet officially known, but the debate on increased integration has already begun, writes Jessika Roswall.

"Last autumn, when I visited the Öresund region, we discussed these opportunities. Sweden and Denmark both agree more can be done. It must become easier to study and work across the borders, and that is why Sweden will focus on getting rid of border barriers and facilitate increased mobility and integration during the Swedish Presidency."

the Danish requirements for work permits for third-country nationals are too strict, he replied:

"There needs to be a balance between Denmark's immigration policy and the policy that I advocate as Minister for Cooperation. We have recently lowered the monetary thresholds, but have not yet seen the full effects of that measure."



*Morten Dahlin became Denmark's new Minister for Nordic Cooperation after a government reshuffle on 23 November last year. He represents Venstre, The Liberal Party of Denmark, and is also Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs plus Minister for Cities and Rural Districts. Photo: Johan Wessman, News Öresund.*

Jessika Roswall did not participate in the conference. But Morten Dahlin did. He is Denmark's new Minister for Nordic Cooperation representing Ventstre, The Liberal Party of Denmark.

The Nordic Labour Journal got a short interview with him at the conference. In response to the question about whether