

New report from NTNU Samfunnsforskning AS (NTNU Social Research):

Myths and realities - immigrants' encounters with the Child Welfare Service

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Background

The relationship between the immigrant population and Norway's Child Welfare Services has long been described as conflict-ridden, and the debate has been characterized by strong opinions and few facts. Until recently, evidence-based knowledge on the subject has been limited, which leaves the field open to 'armchair assumptions'. The Child Welfare Services has been criticized for intervening more often in minority families than in families with a majority background. They are criticized for a lack of cultural sensitivity and for showing little understanding of the situation in which many immigrants find themselves – 'new in Norway'. The impression in the media is largely based on minority families' perceptions that they are especially vulnerable, misunderstood and unfairly treated.

A premise of the debate on the relationship between the Child Welfare Services and the minority population has been an assertion that child protection interventions are over-represented among children of minority backgrounds. This is some of the background for the wish expressed by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs for more knowledge about the subject. Our task has been to investigate whether this impression of the Child Welfare Services is based on myths or reality.

- Are immigrants over-represented in the Child Welfare Services?
- Why are the encounters experienced as challenging?
- What is the content of the challenges, and how should they be understood and explained?
- What relates to cultural differences, what relates to language problems, and what has its background in migration history and the minority presence in Norway?

The purpose of the project has thus been to gain greater knowledge about the encounters between the immigrant population and the Child Welfare Services. Based on both registry data and various types of qualitative data, our main conclusion is that there are many myths, but some realities as well.

Child protection measures among children and adolescents with an immigrant background

Previous research has shown that children and adolescents with a minority background, especially first-generation immigrants, are over-represented in child protection statistics – with regard to both voluntary assistance measures and care orders. However, the analyses have provided limited information about different immigration categories and have not differentiated unaccompanied minors as a separate category that it may be appropriate to exclude from the analyses of traditional child protection measures. An important aim of our analyses has therefore been to provide a more detailed overview of the situation – with a focus on both charting the extent of child protection measures among various immigrant groups, in comparison with children who do not have an immigrant background, and analysing variations and changes in child protection pathways, which will largely be an update of previous analyses based on data from 2009 and 2012 (Kalve and Dyrhaug 2011, Dyrhaug and Sky 2015). In addition, we have investigated whether there are differences between various groups (both between different groups of immigrants, and between these groups and children who do not have an immigrant background), in terms of socio-economic status, gender, generation and migration background. In most of the analyses, we have excluded the group ‘unaccompanied refugee minors’, because the rationale for interventions for this group is completely different from that for other children. Reviews of knowledge about encounters between immigrants and the Child Welfare Services (Holm-Hansen et al 2007, Paulsen et al 2014) indicate that better use should be made of existing registry data to gain more knowledge about long-term outcomes. We have therefore looked more closely at the use of child protection measures over time. This concerns movements both into and out of child protection measures – both in general and for different types of measures. This could provide insight into whether minority children have a different pathway through the Child Welfare Service.

Studies show that children in families with low socio-economic status are over-represented in child protection statistics (Kojan 2011). We have investigated whether this also applies to children of immigrant background, and have looked more closely at factors such as education, income and employment, as well as social security status, geography and other demographics. We have also explored this in relation to generational effects. Several factors are relevant in this context: First, any differences between immigrants and those born in Norway with an immigrant background. Second, the question about whether child protection measures are ‘transmitted’ from one generation to the next – whether the children of those children who have been in the child protection system receive more assistance from the Child Welfare Services than others. A final question is whether children from minority backgrounds who receive child protection measures have adult careers that are similar to or different from equivalent groups of children from majority backgrounds, measured using traditional transition markers.

Key finding

- There is little difference in judicially mandated care intervention measures ('omsorgstiltak') between children with an immigrant background and the rest of the population. The differences have been reduced since the previous Statistics Norway (SSB) report (Dyrhaug and Sky 2015) based on data from 2012.
- The level is somewhat lower for children born in Norway with an immigrant background than for the population without an immigrant background.
- There are great differences between countries. An interesting characteristic is that the groups that have received most attention in the media (families from Poland, Russia, India) are not among those with a particularly high proportion of orders for children to be taken into care.
- The largest immigrant group in Norway (immigrants from Poland) is below average in the population in terms of care orders.
- Among Norwegian-born children with one parent born abroad, the proportion of care orders is higher than in all the other groups. This is not an immigration category, but in several of the municipalities this group is included in their descriptions.
- Voluntary assistance measures in the immigrant population are substantially higher than in the general population. This applies to advice and guidance as well as poverty reduction measures.
- Controlling for socio-economic background reduces the differences between the immigrant population and the population without an immigrant background.
- Regarding voluntary assistance measures, the data material shows great differences between different groups. Refugees are strongly over-represented. Controlling for socio-economic factors and marital status (couple/single parent) reduces the differences.
- A refugee background increases the likelihood of voluntary assistance measures, but not mandatory care interventions.

The review of registry data shows the importance of detailed analyses in capturing variations both between and within the different groups. For the most extensive and invasive measures, for example, there are no differences between the groups. However, more detailed exploration of the material shows that children with and without immigrant backgrounds have different trajectories.

Need for a broad focus

In the material, we find differences between countries, and we find differences between the various immigration categories, but the group that stands out the most consists of children with one parent (mother or father) born abroad. As we have already mentioned, this group is not usually referred to as part of the immigrant population, but we have chosen to differentiate them because the pattern we find here is different from that in the other groups. We know too little about how this might be explained, but there is reason to investigate further whether these families have characteristics or live under conditions that might help to shed light on the surprising figures.

In total, the registry analysis shows that we must have a broad focus when we seek to explain the encounters of the immigrant population with the Child Welfare Service. By *a broad* focus, we mean

that the encounters between the Child Welfare Service and the minority population must be understood in terms of a set of factors:

- (1) Factors related to minorities
- (2) Factors related to living conditions
- (3) Refugee-related factors

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