

Children and Young People's Experiences of Violent Islamist Extremism

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Time to take children's exposure to violence seriously

“When you lack an identity, you'll end up looking for one; it's that simple. When you are outside of society, you really want to get in in some way; you want to be important.”

These are the words of Kaysan, whose friends have joined violent Islamist milieus; one of the reasons why children and young people are radicalised. Kaysan is one of the children we have met as part of the work to produce this report.

We have spoken to children who have themselves been involved in violent Islamist milieus, others know someone who has been involved in violent Islamist extremism. Some children have no personal experience, instead they are reflecting on it from a bit more of a distance because they live or go to school in an area where people have been recruited. It is their voices you encounter in this report.

Something that became clear when we reviewed the research in this area is that there are few or no studies that describe the situation for these three groups of children using children as informants. Consequently, this report is in many ways unique, as are the voices of the children and young people we have heard on this issue.

In October 2016, the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden was commissioned by the Swedish Government to learn more about children's experiences of violent extremism by talking to children who are affected by it in different ways. What these children described made it clear that there are no simple answers to the question of why children and young people become radicalised. What the children described can contribute to our understanding of how children and young people perceive their situation and of the factors they see in their everyday lives that may contribute to people becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism.

The children describe a vulnerability that is caused by violence, crime and difficult family circumstances, but also exclusion, racism and resignation about their future. According to the children, this can lead to a search for belonging, which makes it possible for children and young people to be attracted by the Islamist groups' propaganda, with its promises of a sense of community and a better life. One child describes it in this way:

“Many people lack this kind of brotherhood. Many people sit at home and have no friends. So you go online and watch a video, a propaganda video, and like ... yes, talk about brotherhood and ... yes, they show some happy images from Syria and Iraq and so you think ‘I have no friends here in Sweden, but there I'll have everything’. Of course you go there. Because you've got nothing here in Sweden.”

The areas where the children come from are areas classified by the police as particularly vulnerable areas, one of the criteria for which is the presence of religious extremism. Other characteristics are a high level of crime and violence, which has been a prominent feature in our conversations.¹

What the children describe shines light on failings in terms of how Swedish society ensures the rights set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, for example the right to protection from violence. The Ombudsman for Children believes it is necessary to make use of children and young people's own experiences of coming into contact with violent Islamist extremism and to take seriously the exposure to violence that is a part of some children's everyday lives in order to prevent children being harmed by becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism. Consequently, it is our opinion that the Government should draw up a combined national action plan for preventing and stopping violence against children in Sweden.

I would like to thank the children and young people who were so brave in coming forward and sharing their experiences and thoughts. By doing so, you have contributed to the aim of the report: preventing children being harmed by becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism. The Government now needs to listen to your voices and take action.

Anna Karin Hildingson Boqvist,
Acting Ombudsman for Children

¹ Swedish Police Authority, *Utsatta områden – Social ordning, kriminell struktur och utmaningar för Polisen* (Vulnerable Areas – Social Order, Criminal Structure and Challenges for the Police), 2016, p. 10.

Summary

Around 300 people from Sweden are estimated to have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join violent Islamist groups. Several have taken their children with them. In recent years, we have also been able to follow the accounts of children and young people who have themselves travelled abroad in order to fight with or against Islamist terror groups. The numbers travelling have now declined. At the same time, the Swedish Security Service points out that there is a risk of followers of Islamist terror organisations carrying out attacks in Sweden instead. Many of those who have travelled – children and adults – return to Sweden and bring their experiences, knowledge and contacts back with them. Some have received military training and may have committed terrorist acts while abroad.²

We have allowed children and young people to tell us what they know, believe and think about how people become involved in violent Islamist extremism, who these people are and why this happens. We have also asked about what support children and young people who come into contact with violent Islamist extremism may need. We have spoken to children who have themselves been involved in violent Islamist milieus and children who know someone who is or has been involved in violent Islamist extremism. We have also spoken to children who have no personal experience and instead are reflecting on it from a bit more of a distance because they live or go to school in an area where people have been recruited. It is their voices you encounter in this report.

Something that became clear when we reviewed the research in this area is that there are few or no studies that describe the situation for these three groups of children using children as informants. Consequently, this report is in many ways unique, as are the voices of the children we have heard on this issue.

The background to our conversations with children and young people is that the Ombudsman for Children was tasked by the Government in October 2016 with learning more about children's experiences of violent extremism. By listening to children, we would learn about children's experiences of being affected by the problem of people who travel from Sweden to conflict areas for terrorism purposes. The aim was to prevent children being harmed. Given that girls and boys are affected by or involved in violent extremism in different ways, the work involved taking a gender equality perspective into account.

Looking at how children and young people are affected by violent Islamist extremism involves more than just the risk that they will carry out terrorist attacks. Our conversations show that there are complex processes leading up to children and young people being radicalised. The children themselves emphasise that there are no simple answers to the question of why people join violent Islamist milieus. In the conversations, they pick out a number of causes that, by interacting, may lead to children and young people being radicalised:

² Swedish Security Service, Årsbok 2016 (Yearbook 2016), p. 52.

- The children describe how children and young people in the area feel they lack opportunities to get a good job and a steady income in the future. This can lead to a sense of exclusion from the rest of society.
- The feeling of resignation can lead to people being drawn into criminal and destructive milieus. Children express the opinion that joining violent groups can be a way to change your life, either by getting away from a certain lifestyle or as an attempt to “have your sins forgiven”.
- Crime and violence are present in these children’s everyday lives in various ways. This can involve shootings, car fires and stone throwing. According to the children, violence in the area leads to violence being normalised, which may lower the threshold at which the children turn to violence themselves.
- The children also bring up the search for belonging and social context, which – combined with a lack of information and knowledge and unanswered questions about religion and faith – makes young people more susceptible to being attracted by propaganda that promises a sense of community and a better life.

The Ombudsman for Children’s proposals

- **Adopt a combined national action plan concerning violence against children**
- **Task authorities with involving children and young people in their work to combat violence**
- **Ensure that children and young people who have been involved in violent Islamist extremism participate in the planning and implementation of initiatives and support from social services and that social services have sufficient knowledge to make assessments of what is in the best interests of the child in these situations**
- **Concerns that children and young people are at risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism must always be reported to the social welfare committee**
- **Ensure that there is support for parents of children and young people who are at risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism and for families of children who have joined violent Islamist milieus**
- **Ensure that schools’ efforts to promote democratic values meet children’s needs in terms of providing forums for discussing difficult issues, including violent Islamist extremism**

Background

The commission

In October 2016, the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden was commissioned by the Swedish Government to learn more about children's experiences of violent extremism. The aim was to prevent children being harmed by using children's experiences as a basis. Given that girls and boys are affected by or involved in violent extremism in different ways, the work involved taking a gender equality perspective into account.³

The commission consists of two parts. The first part involves the Ombudsman for Children listening to children in order to learn about their experiences of being affected by the problem of people travelling from Sweden to conflict areas for terrorism purposes. The second part of the commission involves the Ombudsman for Children compiling existing research and knowledge about children and young people who are directly or indirectly affected by right-wing and left-wing extremism.

The commission also involves the Ombudsman for Children compiling the results of both parts of the commission in reports that will be distributed among public authorities, municipalities and other actors that work with children. In this report we set out the results of our conversations with children and young people who have experiences of violent Islamist extremism. A report on the second part of the commission, which focuses on existing research into violent left-wing and right-wing extremism, will be published in May 2018.

An important aspect of the Ombudsman for Children's commission is monitoring and pushing for compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and paying particular attention to ensuring that laws and other statutes, and how these are applied, are consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁴ Consequently, the implementation of this commission has used a children's rights perspective as its starting point with the aim of shining light on and problematising what society needs to do in order to ensure the rights of children and young people affected by violent Islamist extremism in various ways and to prevent children being harmed.

Ombudsman for Children in Sweden (MADE AS AN INFO BOX)

The Ombudsman for Children is a central government agency that is tasked with representing the rights of children and young people on the basis of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We engage in regular dialogue with children and young people in order to learn about their circumstances and what they think about topical issues. We monitor and push for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in municipalities, county councils/regions and public authorities. The Ombudsman for Children provides information, shapes opinion and proposes changes to laws and ordinances in matters pertaining to the rights of children and young people.

³ Uppdrag till Barnombudsmannen att öka kunskapen om barns upplevelser av våldsbejakande extremism och terrorism (Commission to the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden to learn more about children's experiences of violent extremism and terrorism) (Ku2016/02294/D).

⁴ The Ombudsman for Children Act (1993:335), Section 2.

Current situation

The Swedish Security Service's assessment is that around 300 people from Sweden have travelled to Syria and Iraq in order to join violent Islamist groups since 2012. Several of these people were children. These children have travelled both on their own initiative and accompanying parents and other relatives who have joined violent Islamist groups.⁵

The current situation is that there has been a decline in the numbers travelling from Sweden to conflict zones. At the same time, however, the Security Service points out that there is a risk of followers of Islamist terror organisations carrying out attacks in Sweden instead. Many of those who have travelled – both children and adults – return to Sweden and bring their experiences, knowledge and contacts back with them. Some have received military training and may have committed terrorist acts while abroad.⁶

The children affected

Violent Islamist extremism affects many more children than just those who have travelled or have attempted to travel. We have spoken to children who have themselves been involved in violent Islamist milieus and children who know someone who is or has been involved in violent Islamist extremism. We have also spoken to children who have no personal experience and instead are reflecting on it from a bit more of a distance because they live or go to school in an area where people have been recruited. It is their voices you encounter in this report.

Something that became clear when we reviewed the research in this area is that there are few or no studies that describe the situation for these three groups of children using children as informants. Consequently, this report is in many ways unique, as are the voices of the children we have heard on this issue.

There are no simple answers to the question of why children and young people themselves become involved in violent Islamist extremism. Research shows that bonds of friendship and relationships are the most significant factors, both positive and negative, in terms of recruiting young people to Islamist terror organisations.⁷ Research also shows that extremist groups recruit from environments in which violence and crime are common. The suburbs of our major cities are mentioned as examples.⁸ Studies also point out that it is common for those who travel to have had a criminal past; up to 70 per cent of recruits in some studies.⁹ Ankestyrelsen (the National Social Appeals Board) in Denmark has looked at 20 cases in which young people are presumed to have travelled in order to join Daesh. In this report, Ankestyrelsen states that the majority of these young people were known to social services before they were recruited.

⁵ Swedish Security Service, Färre reser från Sverige till terrororganisationer (Fewer people travelling from Sweden to terror organisations), <http://www.sakerhetspolisen.se/ovrigt/pressrum/aktuellt/aktuellt/2017-06-27-farre-reser-fran-sverige-till-terroristorganisationer.html>, accessed 22/12/2017.

⁶ Swedish Security Service, Årsbok 2016 (Yearbook 2016), p. 52.

⁷ Bjørge, Tore, *Forebygging av kriminalitet* (Prevention of crime), Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 2015.

⁸ Sarnecki, Jerzy, *Från traditionell till ideologiskt motiverad brottslighet* (From traditional to ideologically motivated crime) in *Våldsbejakande extremism: En forskarantologi av* (Violent extremism: A research anthology) by the Committee of Inquiry En nationell samordnare för att värna demokratin mot våldsbejakande extremism (A national coordinator to safeguard democracy against violent extremism) (SOU 2017:67), p. 84.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 69.

Most of these young people grew up in Denmark, but only four have completed upper secondary school.¹⁰

A great deal of online Islamist propaganda is targeted at young people and the use of the internet has therefore become an increasingly important pull factor in this environment.¹¹ In a study from the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF), young people speak about how they are able to see propaganda and even executions and murder in their social media feeds. Posts that are commented or clicked on become more visible and it can be difficult to protect yourself from or choose not to see images of this kind.¹²

¹⁰ Ankestyrelsen, Ankestyrelsens undersøgelse af 20 sager om unge formodet udrejst til væbnet konflikt, (The Danish National Social Appeals Board's investigation of 20 cases of young people who probably travelled abroad to armed conflict), 2015.

¹¹ Ranstorp, Magnus, Gustafsson, Linus, Hyllengren, Peder, Förebyggande av våldsbejakande extremism på lokal nivå: Exempel och lärdomar från Sverige och Europa (Prevention of violent extremism at the local level: Examples and lessons that can be learned from Sweden and Europe), Swedish Defence University, CATS, 2015, pp. 14 ff.

¹² Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, Främmande är skrämmande – ungas röster om våldsbejakande extremism (Foreign is frightening – young people's views on violent extremism), 2016.

What we did

On the basis of the commission to listen to children and young people and learn about children's experiences of being affected by the problem of people travelling from Sweden to conflict areas for terrorism purposes, we have had qualitative conversations with children and young people who have been affected by these issues in various ways.

The children have varied experiences of violent Islamist extremism. Some live in or very close to the extreme milieus, while others are reflecting on them from somewhat more of a distance. In order to gain a broad understanding of children's differing experiences, we have chosen to meet children from three groups:

1. Children with direct experience of having themselves been involved in violent Islamist extremism.
2. Children with experience of relatives or friends who are or have been involved in violent Islamist extremism.
3. Children who do not have direct experience of violent Islamist extremism but who live in areas from where people have joined violent Islamist milieus.

We have come into contact with children and young people through various channels: social services, police officers, schools, civil society organisations and local coordinators against violent extremism.

The majority of those with direct experience of violent Islamist extremism come from just a few places in Sweden. In addition, we have met with children and young people who live in the areas where people who have joined come from. The areas where the children in this report come from are areas that are classified by the police as particularly vulnerable areas, one of the criteria for which is the presence of religious extremism.¹³

Reaching the children we have wanted to talk to has been a difficult and sizeable job. While working, we have come up against a great deal of resistance from both children and young people themselves and from the adults around them.

Violent Islamist extremism is clearly a sensitive subject. This commission shows that it is both taboo and difficult for many of those who have experience of it to talk about. Our impression is also that being asked whether you want to talk about your experiences may be perceived as stigmatising and singling out those asked. There is often an underlying fear that yourself or your family will be identified as terrorists in the community and in the media.

In many cases, the children and young people who have experience of having been involved in violent Islamist extremism have already been subject to extensive exposure in the media, without having instigated this themselves. This has been very trying for these children and

¹³ Swedish Police Authority, Utsatta områden – Social ordning, kriminell struktur och utmaningar för Polisen (Vulnerable Areas – Social Order, Criminal Structure and Challenges for the Police), 2016, p. 10.

their families. We have noted a far-reaching desire to protect themselves, but primarily their relatives, from further media exposure. In some cases, this has made the children feel compelled to refrain from meeting us, despite actually wanting to talk about their experiences.

In our attempts to make contact with children and young people, we have also come up against extensive gatekeeping on the part of adults close to these children. They have been driven by a desire to protect either the child or their own relationship with the child. For example, adults close to these children have chosen to protect them from talking about things that are difficult or stir up a lot of emotions. However, this has also involved adults who know the child in a professional capacity, e.g. through social services and schools, being afraid that their own relationship with the child and their family would be harmed by the child talking to us about their experiences.

The Ombudsman for Children has met with and listened to 55 children and young people aged 12–25. The young people who were over 18 when we met them were under 18 when they gained their experiences of violent Islamist extremism. The gender distribution is equal, we have met 28 boys and 27 girls. Unfortunately, the distribution between the three different groups of children is more unequal. It has been particularly difficult to get the chance to talk to children who have their own direct experiences of travelling or having relatives who have travelled. The largest proportion of the children we have talked to are those in the group who live in areas where people who have jointed violent Islamist milieus come from. However, we allow those with more direct experiences of violent Islamist extremism a great deal of space among the accounts that are reproduced.

We have met and talked with the children and young people at schools, in their home environments and in the Ombudsman for Children's offices.

Method used for conversations and analysis

We use the method Young Speakers during the Ombudsman for Children's meetings with children and young people. This method is qualitative and is suitable for both individual conversations and those involving groups. The basic premise is that the children talk about what they themselves have experience of and we regard the child as an expert in their own situation. The conversation leader asks open questions and follows the child's account so that the child's own experiences and perceptions will emerge.¹⁴

Before the Ombudsman for Children meets children and young people under the age of 18, we obtain consent from their legal guardians. During the meeting with the children, they are informed about the Ombudsman for Children's work and specific commission. Naturally, the children also have to consent to their participation. We record the conversations if we are given permission to do so.

¹⁴ Swedish Police Authority, Utsatta områden – Social ordning, kriminell struktur och utmaningar för Polisen (Vulnerable Areas – Social Order, Criminal Structure and Challenges for the Police), 2016, p. 10.

The children and young people we have met for this report were able to choose whether they wanted to talk as part of a group or individually.

For this commission, the children have initially been asked about their perceptions of living in their area and about their knowledge and experience of violent Islamist extremism. The children have then largely guided the conversation and addressed issues they think are important. Because we have, on the basis of the commission, been particularly interested in certain subjects, we have also asked direct, but open, questions. For example, the children have been asked about what sort of help they would have needed, what help they think others would have needed and why young people become radicalised.

We have then transcribed all the conversations and made thematic analyses of the children's accounts. The themes have been based on the questions in the commission and the areas the children have chosen to bring up. One example of an area that we did not have questions about but the children themselves brought up is religion, especially Islam. In the subsequent analysis we have also looked at how children from the three different groups talk about various themes.

The quotations in this report are the children's own words and have been selected because they highlight various aspects of the children's accounts. Sometimes they illuminate individual aspects that a child has highlighted from a theme, sometimes they represent patterns we have found in our analysis or represent children's own conclusions. In other words, our qualitative, interpretive analysis shifts between the whole and parts of it and between specific statements and the conversation or material as a whole in order to understand what is being said.¹⁵

The children describe complex situations and often point out themselves that there are no simple answers to the questions of how someone becomes radicalised or what support may be required. In the analysis sections, we have attempted to delve more deeply into the interpretation of the children's accounts without losing sight of their complexity.

We are not able to generalise our results on the basis of the qualitative selection and the children are therefore representing only themselves. Nevertheless, the accounts do provide examples of how children with different experiences perceive issues pertaining to violent Islamist extremism. The children provide valuable information about their experiences and about what they believe the adult world needs to know, understand and take into account.

The names of the children in this report have been changed. We have given all of them names in order to make for easier reading, but the name says nothing about the actual child's gender, origin, etc.

¹⁵ Cf. Thomsson, Heléne, *Analysera intervjuer – om konsten att göra kvalitativa analyser vid statliga verk och myndigheter* (Analysing interviews – the art of conducting qualitative analyses in central government agencies and authorities), 2014, p. 51.

Terms

Many terms have been used in this report. The intention of this section is to create a common starting point for the report by describing how we use terms that form the main focus in line with the government commission.

There are currently no definitive and universal definitions of several relevant terms, which means in practise that terms may be used in different ways by different actors.¹⁶ The Ombudsman for Children believes it is important that we use the same definitions as other actors. We are primarily using the Swedish Security Service's and the National Coordinator Against Violent Extremism's definitions.

The terms that appear in and/or are relevant to the report are listed below, along with a source for those who would like to read more.

Terrorism can be defined in various ways and there is currently no common interpretation. The Swedish Act on Criminal Responsibility for Terrorist Offences (2003:148) defines a *terrorist offence* as an act that may seriously harm a state or an international organisation and where the intention is to seriously intimidate a population or group of a population, to unduly compel public bodies or an international organisation to take action or refrain from taking action, or to seriously destabilise or destroy fundamental political, constitutional, financial or social structures in a state or international organisation.¹⁷

Violent extremism can be defined as various ideologies that promote or legitimise violence as a means by which to realise extreme ideological views and ideas and where terrorism is a method that is used by violent extremist groups and individuals.¹⁸

Violent Islamist extremism can be defined as activities that threaten security, are motivated by Islamist arguments and ultimately aim to, with the aid of violence or threats of violence, change a society in an undemocratic direction.¹⁹

Radicalisation can be defined as a process in which individuals are introduced to an openly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement away from moderate ideas in the mainstream towards extreme views.²⁰

A vulnerable area is defined by the Swedish Police as a geographically delimited area where the police believe the situation is serious. The situation is considered to be critical in *especially vulnerable areas*. The area is characterised by a general disinclination to participate in the judicial process and witnesses, victims and people who report crimes may be subject to systematic threats and violence. This situation makes it hard for the police to do their job. To some extent, the area is also home to parallel societal structures, extremism, people who travel abroad to fight in conflict areas and a high concentration of criminals.²¹

¹⁶ Våldsbejakande extremism i Sverige- nuläge och tendenser (Violent extremism in Sweden – current situation and trends) (DS 2014:4), p. 20.

¹⁷ Swedish Act on Criminal Responsibility for Terrorist Offences (2003:148), Section 2.

¹⁸ National Coordinator Against Violent Extremism, Nationell strategi mot våldsbejakande extremism (National Strategy Against Violent Extremism), 2016, p. 7.

¹⁹ Swedish Security Service, Våldsbejakande islamistisk extremism i Sverige (Violent Islamist extremism in Sweden), 2010, p. 9.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Swedish Police Authority, Utsatta områden – Social ordning, kriminell struktur och utmaningar för Polisen (Vulnerable Areas – Social Order, Criminal Structure and Challenges for the Police), 2016, p. 10.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

The rights pursuant to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments combine into a single whole and are to be interpreted in relation to one another. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that this is why it is important that the rights set out in the convention are interpreted on the basis of a holistic perspective.²² This requirement also applies in relation to the state's responsibility for preventing children who are affected by violent Islamist extremism suffering harm.

We would still like to highlight a number of articles that, in our opinion, are of particular significance to understanding children's experiences and placing these in the context of the rights of the child. In doing so, these articles acquire significance in terms of how the Convention on the Rights of the Child is to be used in general when it comes to the state's responsibility for guaranteeing the fundamental human rights of children who become involved in violent Islamist extremism.

Basic principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 2 underlines the equal value and rights of all children. All children who are in a country that has adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child shall have their rights ensured without discrimination. No one may be discriminated against.

Article 3 states that it is the best interests of the child that shall be a primary consideration in all actions that concern the child. That which is in the best interests of the child must be determined in each individual case and consideration shall be given to the child's own opinion and experience.

Article 6 deals with every child's right to life, survival and development. The word 'development' is to be interpreted as a holistic concept that encompasses not just the child's physical health, but also their spiritual, moral, psychological and social development.²³ Accordingly, Article 6 implies a requirement that states party to the convention create the prerequisites that allow every child to grow up in conditions that foster their opportunities to achieve their full potential.

Article 12 highlights the child's right to participate by forming and expressing their opinions and having them taken into account in all matters that affect the child. When these opinions are taken into account, consideration shall be given to the child's age and maturity.

Articles that are of particular importance to children who become involved in violent Islamist extremism

Articles 5 and 18 state that it is the child's parents who have primary responsibility for the child's upbringing and development and for providing the child with direction and guidance

²² UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 5: General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2003, points 6 and 18.

²³ A.a., point 12.3.

when the child exercises their rights under the convention, but that the state shall provide the parents with appropriate assistance when they are performing this responsibility.

Articles 7, 8 and 30 lay down in different ways the child's right to an identity. According to these articles, the child has rights including the right to knowledge about their origin, the right to citizenship, a name and family relationships and a right to their culture, religion and language.

Article 13 deals with the child's right to freedom of expression and states that the child has freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideals of all kinds. Freedom of expression is one of the most fundamental freedoms and rights in a democratic society and the opportunity for children to exercise this right completely plays an important role in their development into a democratic citizen.

Article 14 highlights the child's right to freedom of religion, freedom of thought and freedom of conscience. This right means that the child has the right to profess or adopt a religion of their own choice and the freedom to practise their religion alone or in a community with others through teaching, devotional exercises, worship and religious customs.

Article 19 emphasises the child's right to freedom from all forms of violence. Through the wording "all forms of violence", Article 19 adopts a broad approach and thus encompasses both direct physical violence and more indirect structural violence.

Article 29 deals with the objectives of education and lays down that the purposes of the child's education shall include developing the child's respect for human rights and preparing the child for a responsible life in a free society in a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups.

Article 39 says that children who have experienced – both as victims and perpetrators – for example, exploitation, abuse or armed conflict have the right to physical and psychological recovery.

Becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism

The children tell their stories

The government commission meant that the Ombudsman for Children was to listen to children and learn about children's experiences of being affected by the problem of people travelling from Sweden to conflict areas for terrorism purposes, in order to learn more about children's experiences of violent extremism.

We have allowed children and young people with various experiences to say what they know, believe and think about who it is who travels, how they do so and why children and young people become involved in violent Islamist extremism. Some of the children we met have themselves been involved in violent Islamist extremism, others have a family member or know someone who have joined a violent Islamist milieu. Some of the children have a more distant and indirect experience, for example because they live in an area where people have been recruited.

How you notice that someone is on the path towards radicalisation

When the children talk about how you notice that someone is becoming radicalised, several mention that the person's behaviour changes. Some children have observed that people have begun becoming withdrawn or turning to other groups of people.

"So, how I knew that my friend would go. It was how he was behaving. He was like ... When I said to him 'shall we go and play football' and stuff like that, he was more like 'no, I'll be at home' ... And then, when this had been going on for weeks and months, then I started to get ... that was how I noticed that something would happen", says Manaar.

Raheem describes their friend:

"He was like ... he was a bit into crime; he used to hang out with bad people like. So his parents started to notice that sort of thing."

The children have evidently noticed behavioural changes that they, at least retrospectively, have realised were signs that the person they were close to had begun a process of radicalisation.

The children have also become suspicious when the person has begun showing an interest in, for example, videos with extreme messages or expressing extreme views.

"So, first I didn't think that it would be like this, but then when he started to show more and more and got so interested, I started to talk to my parents and then they said that 'probably nothing will happen' and stuff like that. But then afterwards ... still, then when he went away, then I knew that he wouldn't come back", says Manaar.

Sometimes the radicalisation has been more explicit. The person may even have said that they were thinking about joining a terror organisation. Nima recalls:

“She had said that she wanted to, but her family thought she was just joking. [...] I don’t know, she wanted to. She had talked about it at home several times, that she wanted to fight. But her family never dealt with it, ‘yes, she’s serious, we have to do something about this’. They were like ‘yeah, OK’. They never thought she would actually do it.”

The child is describing how adults close to the girl have not intervened, despite the girl having repeatedly talked about how she wanted to fight. The adult world appears not to have noticed or realised the seriousness of both of these situations. It is clear that the children believe that the adults should have taken on a more responsible and guiding role than they did.

Why children and young people become involved in violent Islamist extremism

The children mention various reasons why children and young people become involved in violent Islamist extremism. For example, they think that this can involve a sense of belonging or an absence of this – the feeling of being excluded and vulnerable.

Some children think that the reason why young people join Islamist terror organisations stems from the person’s childhood and internal family relationships. Samar tells us:

“I think it’s mostly, it’s maybe because of what it was like for the person who has gone and fought with Daesh during their childhood or with their family and what their relationships have been like. It’s maybe more of an anger that makes someone go there so that they know, ‘yes, but I don’t care about you, it doesn’t matter how much you nag me, because you’ve never been there for me.”

Here, Samar describes a sense of exclusion on a more personal level, where a feeling of abandonment can motivate someone to join an Islamist terrorist group.

One child talks about people who travel in order to join up:

“Usually, people want to survive, but these people, they want to die.”

Raheem clarifies:

“So in Syria, most of them for sure know that they will go there and die. They aren’t there to have fun. They call it jihad, you know. You go there to die, you are not there to live.”

What the children are talking about is that it may be a desire to change their life that makes someone travel abroad. The driving force here is the need to escape from a vulnerable situation, rather than a desire to belong.

The children also talk about the significance of crime and how this can be gateway to subsequent radicalisation. Some children describe how children and young people who are criminals hope to find a way out of their destructive lifestyle by joining violent Islamist groups. One child, whose friends have been involved in violent Islamist extremism, tells us:

“I’ve tried to say to my friends that there are other opportunities apart from crime and stuff. But, for example, I’ve now been convicted several times, like in this conviction, my criminal record. It’s

there for like another seven years. I got probation the last time, so that's there for another ten years. And everywhere I apply for a job, maybe ... if it's a good place that is, they ask about criminal records. And then I bring along my record and so they say no. And then I think 'fuck this', but now I'm not thinking like that anymore, because I know I did wrong. But many people think like that. Yes. They get punished once and that means they're being punished their entire lives. [...]"

Here, the child describes how it is common for people who have ended up becoming involved in crime and having a destructive lifestyle to feel they do not have any other options in terms of changing their situation than to turn to violent Islamist extremism.

One child, who has experience from travelling abroad to fight, discusses what direction their life could have taken if they had not decided to travel abroad:

"I had been in prison, 100 %. So my way out ... My way out was that I joined there. Even as a 16-year-old I knew. Because some people need this in order to get on the right path."

Another child, whose friend has been involved in violent Islamist extremism, provides a similar explanation:

"Yes. If you think like this then you are more receptive, if you are in certain negative situations. It is there you become more receptive to this. Because what they promise is an identity, they promise you a role, they promise you a sense of belonging to a group there. They promise you a new chance in life as well. If you have been a criminal in the past, you now have a chance to be forgiven. OK, society maybe doesn't accept you because of this little black mark, or because you've been in prison, but this group accepts you. They couldn't care less what you've done in the past. What they care about is what you're doing now."

Other children we have talked to say that criminals are trying to have their sins forgiven by fighting with Daesh. Mashal explains:

"But then when you hear that like someone is going, most of the time ... A friend says like 'Yes, but all your sins will be forgiven. Come on. Let's go there and fight.' [...] Some people have even paid to go there. 'Yes, if I give you this much money, then you can give it to your parents and then you can just go and then all your sins will be forgiven.' Of course they want all their sins to be forgiven and they go there. But isn't it worse to just die in a war?"

Another child, who has friends who have been involved in violent Islamist extremism, provides a similar explanation:

"I think that lots of people are lost and also that a large percentage of them are criminals. For example, some people from here, there were several who went and almost all of them were convicted criminals. So they had done quite a lot in their lives, so they show this path about how God will forgive you if you do this. So they're stupid and they believe it. So they go down there."

Several of the reasons mentioned by the children involve the structural vulnerability in the area and in society. For example, there may be perceived racism. One child, who has experience of having themselves been involved in violent Islamist extremism, tells us:

“At that time, 2015, there was too much racism and things like that, and then that makes it easy for them [the recruiters] to influence someone. If you are not happy here, in school or some little thing like that, and then they have more influence. So ...”

What the child is describing here is that if someone is, for example, not happy in school, racism can make them feel less included. Jarah, who also has their own experiences of violent Islamist milieus, talks about how they were influenced by racism:

“No, but these people who write propaganda and stuff talk about Syria and Iraq; so they describe it as if it were a state for Muslims and stuff and there is no racism and stuff there, and everyone there is Muslim; all of us are brothers and sisters.”

The picture painted by the propaganda of a sense of community and how all Muslims are included becomes a contrast to vulnerability and racism.

Kaysan, whose friends have been involved in violent Islamist extremism, talks about how perceived exclusion from society and a search for identity may be significant:

“When you lack an identity, you'll end up looking for one; it's that simple. When you are outside of society, you really want to get in in some way; you want to be important.”

Who becomes involved in violent Islamist extremism

When it comes to the question of who becomes involved in violent Islamist extremism, the children often say that it is mainly boys who are radicalised. One child explains this by saying that boys are regarded as stronger and braver in cultures where wars are taking place.

The children describe how boys joint up in order to fight, while girls join up to take care of the boys. The promise of being able to marry a fighter can make girls join up:

“You know, when you are in Syria, then it's called jihad. And girls' jihad, that's taking care of a man; marrying a man and taking care of him”, says Raheem.

Girls may also become involved in violent Islamist extremism because they lack hope about the future; they do not see any other choice. Someone argues that they join up because of pressure from their family, which can arise if the girl is not married when she is in her 20s.

Several children say that they think that it is young people between the ages of 15 and 20 who join up and that the girls may even be a little younger. Ghalia reflects on the question of age:

“Oh yes, I think that at 20, that's the time you maybe think about your life, what's good, what you want to be and stuff. And I think that's the time.”

How and where recruitment takes place

When the children talk about where recruitment to violent Islamist groups takes place, some mention youth centres:

“At the youth centre. That’s how it is ... Like, al-Shabaab, they get quite a few people from there. There are loads of people who go from the youth centre to al-Shabaab”, says Kalila. They argue that the recruiters are at the youth centre for one specific reason: *“Because there are lots of young Somalis, and that’s who they want.”*

According to the children, what happens is that older people who the children think are knowledgeable imams come to the youth centre and try to convince them to join up:

“So they take some kids and say to them ‘we are doing this and we are this good’ and try to brainwash them into believing that they are good. And then they go and fight with Daesh instead of these bad groups. And, anyway, that’s what I’ve heard, that they come to one of these after-school areas and then take ... of take, like brainwash some kids so they go with them”, says Samar.

Samar mentions that the children think these people are imams and when we ask what they mean by this, Samar explains:

“I don’t believe it, but like, so they try to dress like they are.”

The risk of becoming involved in Islamist terrorist groups is perceived as imminent if someone who the children believe is a learned person offers a purpose in life and promises an identity and brotherhood.

“Because they [the young people] think these people know better. Because if someone comes and says like ‘yes, I know everything about the Qur’an, it’s totally fine, come with me’. If you think that this person knows better than you, then you’ll listen to them, and this is what they think”, explains Kalila.

According to the children, the recruiters make the children think they are doing something good for Islam and that they can help innocent people by joining up.

Another forum for recruitment and propaganda mentioned by the children is the internet. Jarah describes how the propaganda turned up as soon as they opened a Twitter account and that was how they became interested:

“[T]here is not so much now, but two years, three years ago, there was a huge amount of propaganda on the internet. Just on Twitter, a huge number of people who were sharing stuff all the time. And I just opened an account and then it came, I mean their propaganda. And then, the more time went on I got deeper into it and deeper and deeper.”

The propaganda from Daesh and other terrorist groups has clearly reached both children who have been interested themselves, and have subsequently also become involved in violent

Islamist extremism, and children whose only connection to violent Islamist extremism is that they live or go to school in an area where people who have joined these milieus come from.

The children also describe how it is easy to access videos from violent Islamist groups:

“Like tabloids sometimes post these propaganda videos that Daesh use, and then ... yes, that was how I saw one the first time”, says a child who has themselves been involved in violent Islamist extremism.

Swedish media may therefore be a child’s first contact with propaganda from extremist groups. The children also describe how violent Islamist groups have websites where you can watch films and read information.

Content of the propaganda

The children’s accounts present a clear picture of what the extremist groups are using to attract recruits. Irsa explains:

“There are lots of people who go to this thing because when they die, they go to paradise. [...] They think that ‘I should help my country, if I die I will still go to paradise because I’m helping my own country’.”

The children describe how the content of the propaganda influences people to want to travel. They think that children and young people are motivated to go and fight because they are convinced that they will get into paradise after they die and that the violent Islamist groups will take care of their families. Other children think that children and young people can be convinced by friends with talk of how all your sins will be forgiven.

Mousa, who has experience of travelling abroad to fight, tells us:

“Many people lack this kind of brotherhood. Many people sit at home and have no friends. So you go online and watch a video, a propaganda video, and like ... yes, talk about brotherhood and ... yes, they show some happy images from Syria and Iraq and so you think ‘I have no friends here in Sweden, but there I’ll have everything’. Of course you go there. Because you’ve got nothing here in Sweden.”

Manaar has a friend who has travelled abroad to fight and talks about how the propaganda influenced the friend:

“When I knew him, he was really like, he liked war. So he watched a lot. He showed me these videos of Daesh and stuff like that, and you are really affected when you watch these videos. And then you just want more and more. Then when you get older, then you like it.”

Living in a particularly vulnerable area

In order to understand the contexts in which radicalisation takes place, we have asked the children what it is like living in the place where they live (which is in particularly vulnerable areas). The children’s descriptions present differing views. On the one hand they are happy, on

the other they feel unsafe. What is clear is that they connect the risk of radicalisation to violence, crime and exclusion in the areas.

When the children tell us why they are happy in the area, they talk about the close-knit community, that everyone talk to each other and that they are close to their families, cousins and relatives. They often say that their family and parents are the people they usually turn to and listen to.

At the same time, the children are aware of how others regard the area and they are eager to talk about how it is not as dangerous as some people believe. Fahyim tells us:

“So here, it’s like ... It is really like, for me it’s safe here, do you understand? It, like ... But some people think it’s like a no-go zone, you know. That you can’t come here, and that it’s dangerous and stuff, but they only show the bad side. But I think like ... And I’m happy here, because it’s like a good place for me.”

Children feel that the media paints a negative picture, that they exaggerate what happens and single out their area as a lawless area where no one dares to go.

Dounya tells us:

“And I think that [Swedish tabloid] Aftonbladet only posts all the bad things that happen here, never anything good or ... like something good that has happened here. Only everything bad, that there have been shootings.”

Several children say that it would be desirable if the media reported everything they feel is positive. When the local area is described as a dangerous place characterised by crime, violence and drug dealing, the children are worried that this image will also, to some extent, make an impression on how the rest of the world sees them.

However, the children themselves also feel a sense of insecurity that is described in the media and they see the crime in the area every day. Raheem tells us:

“So, how do I explain? You know, people, they always have to join a gang so they can defend themselves. You are like out by yourself and have to start selling things. If someone takes you on, you can’t defend yourself. So that’s why you have to build up a group around yourself. You have to have a gang.”

This child is describing a gang milieu in which the gang provides help and protection until you do something wrong or end up in a dispute.

The children we have talked to know who the criminals are, where the criminals sell drugs and they describe in detail what they have witnessed. Several children say that they have heard shots or seen someone who has been shot and injured.

“We’ve seen ... Like, I’ve seen. I’ve seen someone get shot. Like, I didn’t see when they were shot, but I saw them when they were like on the ground and stuff”, says Fahyim.

Another child describes a similar situation:

“It’s really unfair here. It’s ... I told you, for example, a few ... like a month ago and a week, when there was someone who shot here. He was alive, they took him. They were on their way to ... Like, it was a roundabout. Then, when they came out of the roundabout, then the police stopped them, they said you have to wait for the ambulance, you can’t take him.”

The children wish the area was not like this:

“No, like I get scared, I’m just ‘what if this happens again’ and stuff. So you get scared and start to panic and stuff. Like, I get anxious and I’m just ‘no, no, I don’t want to hear that’”, says Heba.

Not all of the children are afraid; however, violence and crime appear to be a reality that the children generally find strategies for dealing with. Someone describes how they do not go to certain places, another talks about how they crouch down when they go past people they know are dangerous and several state that they avoid going out in the evening.

The children’s accounts indicate that the violence and crime affect boys and girls in different ways.

Mashal tells us:

“It depends; there are like good places there, but there are pretty worrying places, like when it comes to girls, they can’t go out in the afternoon. You know, when it gets dark here. Most of the time there are boys out here.”

Our interpretation of what Mashal describes is that it is more dangerous for girls than for boys to be in certain places where violence may occur and that girls therefore avoid being in places in the area that are regarded as “unsafe”.

When it comes to boys, the children describe how they have more freedom to be in these areas because boys are expected to be “tough” and not to show that they are afraid of violence and crime. In this way, the children’s accounts also demonstrate that boys and girls have different attitudes to the violence.

Linked in to the violence, the children’s accounts also indicate that there are behavioural norms and a form of social control that affect girls to a greater degree.

“Boys are allowed to go anywhere. Girls aren’t. I’m thinking about the youth centres. Girls don’t dare to go to youth centres because there are more boys. And it’s like the boys make the rules”, describes Eshal.

Heba has a similar reasoning:

“Yes, but there are places where girls can’t be, for example. Like, for example, at midnight, they can’t be there, as there are boys there and who knows what they might do.”

When we ask the children how they know which places girls are not supposed to be, Heba answers:

“Like ... I don’t know. It’s like ... It is just like that, there are ... there are like unwritten rules.”

Trust in public institutions

Listening to the children’s accounts makes it clear that there is a generally low level of trust in public institutions.

“Then in the media they say ‘they don’t have much trust in the authorities’ and so on, and it’s really true, but we don’t get any help. It’s only social services who write papers”, says one child who has experience themselves of having been involved in violent Islamist extremism.

Basically, none of the children have brought up social services of their own accord when we have been talking about what support children and young people who become involved in violent Islamist extremism can obtain and are in need of. Instead, what appears to be the case in these areas is that there is a fear of social services becoming involved when a child has problems. In response to the direct question of whether the children think that social services are able to do anything to help these children and young people, the answers we have been given are that social services do not help people and instead are an authority that “takes children away from their parents”.

The children appear to think that the primary responsibility for helping a child who is involved or is at risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism is that of their relatives, in particular their parents.

The children’s accounts indicate that both the children and their parents have a low level of trust in the notion that society exists for its citizens. Instead of looking for support from public institutions in order to get help when a child is at risk of harm, some families choose to “take matters into their own hands”.

Religion and extremism One of the themes that the children have specifically drawn our attention to is how they view religion in relation to violent Islamist extremism. Religion plays a central role in several of the children’s lives. A number of children attend Qur’an schools in their free time and they speak about this as something positive.

“Every Friday, it starts at like twelve o’clock, so I don’t make it. But on Saturday, Sundays, I go, that’s the Qur’an school. We start at ten, finish at twelve, it’s two hours”, says Atef.

Children who do not have experience themselves but live in areas where people who have joined violent Islamist groups come from tell us that religion has taught them that killing is always wrong and that terrorists are doing wrong.

“I have been learning since I was young that you shouldn’t behave badly towards anyone or kill anyone. And I have also heard it in the news, my parents have said it, I hear it almost every day.

You have to be nice to people. And killing someone is not nice. And if you take someone's life, that person could have had a child who might one day have made a cure for cancer or do something good for mankind, then you have taken that life. A life that will not ... this person will not live again, they will die", explains Wail. When we ask them who has taught them that this is wrong, Wail responds: *"The news and I read the Qur'an, so we talk about it in Qur'an school"*.

Many children are frustrated that violent Islamist groups use Islam in order to recruit new followers and that those who join up do so in the name of Islam. They have misinterpreted Islam and the Qur'an, and they have not understood the meaning of the religion. The children emphasise that it is actually *haram*, i.e. forbidden, for a Muslim to kill another human being.

Manaar sums it up:

"... it's like this, lots of other people say that it's Islam, Muslims and so on, but that's not Islam. You are not supposed to kill yourself or go to war. So, then so they become like, they're wrong. [...] Because Islam, it's all about peace. Respect and peace and things like that."

These children are therefore stating with determination that Islam stands for something good. According to Islam, you have to be kind, take care of each other and not behave badly. However, the children believe that violent Islamist groups use religion in order to legitimise their acts of violence. The children argue that the people fighting with Islamist terror organisations or committing terror attacks are not real Muslims. On the contrary, the children say that those who fight for terrorist organisations are not adhering to the message of the Qur'an.

Several children are worried that, as Muslims, they become a representative of violent Islamist extremism.

"Maybe like, if a terrorist attack happens, so you maybe shouldn't talk so much about Islam in the media, [...] Because everyone will think that it's bad. Everyone will think that it is bad, everyone will think that all terrorists are Muslims", says Manaar.

Kaysan says that people they meet lay the blame for the attacks that only a few extremist Muslims commit on all Muslims:

"And for me like, it's always been like that I end up in some situation and someone then ... yes, we get into that discussion, they find out I'm Muslim and then this attack happens. In some way I'm then representing 1.7 billion Muslims. But that's not enough, I also have to represent this 0.01 % of extremist Muslims. Everything they've done is on me. 'Why have they done this? Why have you not stopped them?'"

Kaysan feels that responsibility for stopping the extremists is placed in the hands of Muslims specifically, that they and other Muslims are singled out as "the others".

The children discuss how imams and other representatives of the religion can play an important role in terms of informing people about what Islam stands for.

One child whose friend has joined an Islamist terror organisation explains:

“People who are experts in the religion who can help out. People who maybe have authority as well, it becomes much easier to listen.”

This reasoning reflects a perception that the authority imams and other representatives of the religion have provides them with the power to exert influence and the opportunity to make people listen. The children see that this power also comes with responsibility.

Jarah, who has themselves been involved in violent Islamist extremism, talks about how they view the role of imams:

“The fact that the imams and such are more open about this and dare to say, ‘this here ... Daesh and the like are wrong’, and talk about it, explain.”

The children argue that imams and other representatives of the religion should pay attention to the extreme groups and the rhetoric they use and, in doing so, speak out against the extreme messages. At the same time, the children feel that many other representatives of the religion do not dare to talk about the issue in the way the children would like them to.

Kaysan tells us:

“And there’s also this fear, ‘if I say something against these groups well, they’ll maybe go after me then’. I know, just where I live, there’s a man there who has said bad things about some groups and he has been threatened because of it”.

Kaysan realises that adults avoid talking about the issues because they feel afraid for various reasons. Other children say that they have seen that imams have been threatened for speaking out against the extreme groups.

The children’s perception is that imams and other representatives of the religion are afraid that people will think they sympathise with the values the extreme groups stand for. As an example they mention that people who have expressed extreme views have been thrown out of their mosque without anyone even having attempted to challenge what they have said. The children think that those who have authority at the mosque were afraid they would be linked to the people in question and their views.

In several conversations, the children state frequently that Muslims are stigmatised and singled out as terrorists in the public debate and that their religion is thus often confused with extremism.

The children realise that the lack of desire on the part of representatives of the religion to address the issue has consequences. One child whose friend has joined an Islamist terror organisation explains:

“There needs to be more openness. Because the places where these extremist ideas actually grow are precisely those environments in which it is in some way something you’re forbidden to talk about.”

As this child says, the children realise that the lack of deeper discussion about the religion has the opposite effects in extreme milieus.

The Ombudsman for Children's analysis

Radicalisation – a complex interaction at the individual and societal level

Our conversations with children and young people indicate that the processes which lead up to a person becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism stem from a multifaceted set of problems and emanate from circumstances at both the individual level and the societal level. It is evident from the children's accounts that, on the individual level, this may involve a vulnerability due to violence, crime and difficult family circumstances, as well as confusion about identity and a search for excitement. Placed in a societal context, the children describe how the origin of this set of problems may lie in segregation, exclusion and racism, which ultimately results in an existential quest.

The children's accounts indicate that the various factors cannot be regarded existing in isolation from one another. Instead, there are complex cause and effect relationships in which various factors interact and reinforce one another. It must also be pointed out that there are many children and young people who live in circumstances where these 'risk factors' have a presence in their everyday lives, but who never sign up to or legitimise violent ideologies.²⁴

Both the literature and the development work that has attempted to explain why people become involved in violent extremism have been criticised because they are often based on a multicausal perspective, i.e. a number of 'causes' are presented, without looking at how these are connected in a more comprehensive analysis.²⁵ In various strategies and action plans to tackle violent extremism, this perspective tends to be expressed in the presentation of 'check lists' or lists of warning signs for radicalisation.²⁶

On the basis of what children and young people have told us, the Ombudsman for Children believes that it is vital we are able to relate to how various factors may interact and reinforce one another in various ways for different individuals in the processes that lead up to children and young people becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism. We believe it is of the utmost importance to utilise what we can learn from children and young people in terms of the causes and factors that may lead to involvement in violent Islamist extremism. It is therefore a major problem that there is currently pretty much no research in this field that uses children as informants.

A recurrent theme in the children's accounts is identity creation processes and the search for belonging and context. Looked at in the light of a children's rights perspective, there is a link to Article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which deals with the child's right to development. It is clear that the right to development is strongly dependent on the other rights

²⁴ Cf. Carlsson, Christoffer, Att lämna våldsbejakande extremism – En kunskapsöversikt (Leaving violent extremism – a systematic review), Institute for Future Studies, Forskningsrapport 2016/1, 2016, pp. 31 f.

²⁵ Mattsson, Christer, Lebedinski Arfvidson, Clara, Johansson, Thomas, Mellan det angelägna och det svårfångade: En studie av pågående utvecklingsarbete för att förhindra att unga människor rekryteras till miljöer som utövar våld i islams namn (Between what is urgent and what is hard to capture: A study of ongoing development work for preventing young people being recruited to milieus that practise violence in the name of Islam), Gothenburg University: Segerstedt Institute, 2016, pp. 63 f.

²⁶ Andersson Malmros, Robin, Mattsson, Christer, *Från ord till handlingsplan: En rapport om kommunala handlingsplaner mot våldsbejakande extremism* (From talk to action plan: A report on municipal violent extremism action plans), Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2017, p. 58.

in the convention also being realised. This may involve the right to be protected from violence, the right to protection from discrimination, the right to play, rest and recreation and the right to freely exercise and receive support and guidance on their right to freedom of expression, freedom of thought, freedom of opinion and freedom of religion. The children's accounts indicate the importance of regarding the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a unified whole and its various rights as mutually interdependent.

Exclusion and belonging

The children highlight exclusion and a search for belonging as explanations why children become involved in violent Islamist extremism. Structural vulnerability, both in the area and in society as a whole, may lead to children and young people feeling excluded. Exclusion involves both the perception of racism and the feeling of having limited opportunities.

The children discuss how the feeling of exclusion may lead to a search for identity and context, which may be of significance to the risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism. Children who have experience themselves of having been part of extreme Islamist milieus tell us that it was specifically the picture painted of a sense of community and how all Muslims are included that attracted them.

Research indicates that many children who grow up in areas characterised by high unemployment, where a large proportion of the population have a foreign background feel they have a poor chance of getting a good job and a steady income. There are a range of reasons why an individual views themselves as excluded; perceived discrimination, a school that has failed to compensate for differences in background, well-educated adults who have not been able to establish themselves in the qualified labour market and a public debate that singles them out as losers from the very beginning. This feeling is particularly strong among boys and – unlike in many other groups – there is not a strong group identity that can moderate the sense of hopelessness in the heterogeneous suburb. A counterforce of this type is instead sought in identities outside of the ordinary system.²⁷ Social anxiety and lack of faith in the future may direct young people's attention towards groups that offer simple explanations and quick solutions to problems that are apparently intractable.²⁸ The authors of one Danish study argue that perceptions of social uncertainty and weak roots in society, combined with intolerance of differences, aggression problems and a lack of critical capacity are among the most decisive reasons why young individuals are recruited.²⁹

Under Article 6, children have the right to grow up in an environment that promotes their opportunities to develop to their full potential. Article 2 lays down that the rights in the convention shall be guaranteed for every child in Sweden without discrimination of any kind. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has previously criticised Sweden specifically because of differences in how the Convention on the Rights of the Child are implemented in

²⁷ Beach, Dennis, Sernhede, Ove, From learning to labour to learning for marginality: school segregation and marginalization in Swedish suburbs, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32:2, 2011, pp. 257 ff.

²⁸ E.g. Braunthal, Gerard, Right-Extremism in Germany, *German Politics and Society* 97(28), 2016, No. 4, pp. 41–68.

²⁹ Lindekilde, Lasse, Bertelsen, Preben, *Voldelig transnational aktivisme: Islamisk stat, foreign fighters og radikaliserings* (Violent transnational activism: Islamic State, foreign fighters and radicalisation), *Dansk Sociologi*, 2015, No. 4/26.

different county councils and municipalities, which leads to children's access to support and services being inequitable.³⁰

The children's accounts indicate that the segregation and exclusion they describe as present in vulnerable and particularly vulnerable areas has an impact on their faith in the future and their view of the opportunities they have to get an education and find work. According to the children, this leads to them searching for a sense of belonging in alternative and often destructive milieus such as criminal gangs and violent Islamist extremism. The Ombudsman for Children believes that the feeling of exclusion perceived by children and young people who grow up in vulnerable and particularly vulnerable areas may mean that Sweden is failing to ensure these children's right to development in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Violence and vulnerability – radicalisation does not take place in a vacuum

A recurring theme in our conversations with children and young people has been the violence and crime that many have experienced in their neighbourhood. Almost all of the children we have talked to have seen or heard people talking about shootings, car fires and stone throwing in the area. The children know who the criminals are and where they sell drugs. The violence and crime become a reality that the children have strategies for responding to in their everyday lives. For example, the children describe how they keep indoors at certain times of the day and that they do not go to certain places.

The situation in these areas is confirmed by the Swedish Police Authority's report on vulnerable areas. The Police Authority sees how the threshold for violence in these areas has decreased and that the ruthlessness has taken on new dimensions. According to the Police Authority, there is nothing to indicate that the growth in terms of violence will abate unless society is able to turn this trend around.³¹

Research indicates that children who are subjected to or witness chronic and extreme violence are at greater risk of also being subjected to violence in later life. They are themselves also more likely to act violently, both as children and as adults.³² Children and young people who are subjected to violence also often display altered attitudes and values in terms of advocating and accepting violence and aggression as a means by which to resolve conflicts.³³ Unicef says that children who grow up in communities that are characterised by the systematic violence of terror organisations or other armed groups are at greater risk of victimisation or becoming violent themselves.³⁴

³⁰ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Sweden, 2015, point 11.

³¹ Swedish Police Authority, Utsatta områden – Social ordning, kriminell struktur och utmaningar för Polisen (Vulnerable Areas – Social Order, Criminal Structure and Challenges for the Police), 2016, p. 38.

³² Moylan, Carrie A., Herrenkohl, Todd I. and Sousa, Cindy, The Effects of Child Abuse and Exposure to Domestic Violence on Adolescent Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviour Problems, *Journal of Family Violence*, 25(1), 2010, pp. 53 ff; Edleson, Jeffrey, Children's Witnessing of Adult Domestic Violence, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, (8)14, 1999, pp. 839 ff.

³³ Joshi, Paramjit T., O'Donnel, Deborah A., Consequences of Child Exposure to War and Terrorism, *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, Vol 6, No 4., 2003, pp. 275 ff.

³⁴ Unicef, Hidden in Plain Sight: A statistical analysis of violence against children, 2014, p. 8.

According to research into the sociology of childhood, children are shaped by their surroundings. However, children are also participants in their own lives and are therefore shaped by their own experiences. For example, this can mean that they bring experiences and behaviours that have worked well in one context with them over into another. If violence worked as a reasonable solution in one context, it may therefore be transferred over into other contexts with the expectation that it will work as a reasonable and comprehensible solution to conflicts and difficulties.³⁵

Under Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the state shall take appropriate action to protect the child from all forms of violence. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child points out that the prevention of violence in one generation reduces the probability of it occurring in the next. Consequently, the committee believes that the implementation of Article 19 is a very important strategy for reducing and preventing all forms of violence in all societies. The committee also points out that a respectful and supportive environment, free of violence helps children to realise their individual personalities and develop into social, responsible and actively contributing citizens of the local community and society as a whole.³⁶

The children's accounts suggest that violence around them may be related to an increased risk of children and young people becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism. Violence is normalised, which may lower the threshold at which the children turn to violence themselves. At the same time, it is conceivable that the children's position on and attitudes to violence affect how receptive they are to violent Islamist groups' propaganda and messages.

On the basis of what the children tell us, the Ombudsman for Children believes that Sweden is failing to protect children who are growing up in vulnerable and particularly vulnerable areas from violence in the manner required by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The impact violence has on children's upbringing and the risk that they will be drawn into destructive milieus and violent Islamist extremism – which carries a risk of being subjected to further violence – also affects children's opportunities to develop to their full potential. We argue that Sweden is failing to protect children from violence and is thus also failing to guarantee children's right to development.

The significance of crime

As mentioned previously, crime is a presence in many children's everyday lives. In our conversations, the children also repeatedly discuss the significance of crime in relation to children and young people becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism.

The children believe that crime can be a gateway to future radicalisation. Some of them think that criminals may be attracted by the idea that they will have all their sins forgiven and become good Muslims. Others think that this may be a way to change their lives; to get away from a destructive lifestyle when their opportunities to get an education, a job and be accepted

³⁵ Corsaro, William, *The Sociology of Childhood*. Los Angeles, Sage, 2015.

³⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 13: The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence, 2011, point 14.

by society are perceived to be limited. In this context, the children talk about the significance of the promises the propaganda makes of a new chance in life and affiliation to a milieu that is perceived to be standing for something “good”.

Research confirms the theory that there may be links between a previous criminal lifestyle and the risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism. Studies indicate that there is strong support for the assertion that a sizeable proportion of the people who are part of extremist milieus have previously committed crimes not directly related to their ideological involvement.³⁷ The research discusses whether the transition from traditional crime to violent extremism may be a way for young people to end their traditional criminal career. Furthermore, it is said that extreme groups do not ask for professional or academic qualifications, which makes the threshold for entry into this world significantly lower than that of the labour market or the education system.³⁸

Research also points out that research concerning violent extremism is primarily thought to focus on the circumstances that currently prevail, instead of illuminating the long-term processes that lead to individuals joining extreme milieus. One conclusion is therefore that the link between traditional crime and violent extremism is a subject of major interest in terms of future research.³⁹

The hypotheses presented in the research primarily have their sights on young adults.⁴⁰ We argue that the children’s accounts make it clear that this reasoning may also be relevant when it comes to children and young people.

Based on a children’s rights perspective, a greater understanding of the link between previous criminal behaviour and becoming involved in violent extremism is important, especially on the basis of Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child concerning the child’s right to recovery and social reintegration. Article 39 says that children who have experienced, for example, exploitation, abuse or armed conflict have the right to physical and psychological recovery. This applies irrespective of whether the child is regarded as a victim or a perpetrator.

According to Article 6, the support shall aim to create the conditions for children’s opportunities to develop to their full potential. The fact that children and young people who have ended up in crime and a destructive lifestyle are not receiving sufficient support to leave these types of milieu and are thus at risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism demonstrates that Swedish is failing.

³⁷ Sarnecki, Jerzy, *Från traditionell till ideologiskt motiverad brottslighet* (From traditional to ideologically motivated crime) in *Våldsbejakande extremism: En forskarantologi av* (Violent extremism: A research anthology) by the Committee of Inquiry En nationell samordnare för att värna demokratin mot våldsbejakande extremism (A national coordinator to safeguard democracy against violent extremism) (SOU 2017:67), pp. 69 ff.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Sarnecki, Jerzy, *Från traditionell till ideologiskt motiverad brottslighet* (From traditional to ideologically motivated crime) in *Våldsbejakande extremism: En forskarantologi av* (Violent extremism: A research anthology) by the Committee of Inquiry En nationell samordnare för att värna demokratin mot våldsbejakande extremism (A national coordinator to safeguard democracy against violent extremism) (SOU 2017:67), pp. 69 ff.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Girls, boys and attitudes to violence

The children's perceptions are that it is mainly boys who become involved in violent Islamist extremism. Their explanation for this is that boys are more adventurous, more inclined to seek out excitement and are also attracted by the violence or the idea of being seen as a hero. When the children talk about girls who join up, they are instead portrayed as being focused on relational or caring aspects. For example, the children say that the promise of being able to marry and look after a fighter can make girls want to join. The children's thoughts about the differing motives of girls and boys therefore have many similarities with traditional gender norms.

The children's descriptions suggest that boys and girls have different positions on and attitudes to the violence entailed by violent Islamist extremism. The same thing is apparent in the children's descriptions of how they relate to the violence and social control present in the areas where they live. There are codes of behavioural norms that boys and girls are aware of and attempt to comply with. Boys are expected to "conquer" the violence by not showing they are afraid or allowing themselves to be restricted by it in terms of moving freely in their neighbourhood. Consequently, boys have greater freedom but, at the same time, are at greater risk of ending up in crime. On the contrary, the girls' strategies seem to revolve around "avoiding" the violence, for example by not being out at certain times of the day and keeping away from places in the area that are "dangerous". The children's accounts express a perception that girls are expected to behave, conduct themselves well and protect both their reputation and their physical integrity. This also reflects the fact that girls are subject to a greater extent than boys to the social control that prevails in these areas.

According to Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the same rights shall be ensured for every child in Sweden without discrimination of any kind. The right to protection from discrimination implies a requirement that similar cases be treated the same and differing cases differently – for example on the basis of differences between girls and boys. In the light of what the children describe, we argue that future studies concerning models that explain why children and young people become involved in violent Islamist extremism must also apply a gender equality perspective. This is vital in order to reveal any differences between boys and girls in terms of their need for support – both at the prevention phase and for children and young people who have been radicalised – and by extension, to ensure that the interventions targeting affected children are in the best interests of the child.

Stigmatisation of Muslims

In our conversations, children and young people have repeatedly stated that they believe violent Islamist groups are distorting the true meaning of Islam in order to fit their own agenda. They also feel that parallels are being drawn between Islam and violent Islamist extremism in the media and the public debate, which they believe leads to people in general thinking that all Muslims are terrorists.

It is clear that the stigmatisation of Muslims the children describe has an evident impact on the children. One sign of this is how strongly they repudiate the violent Islamist groups' extreme

interpretations of Islam, which reflects how the children take on a certain responsibility for differentiating between Islam and the extremists' interpretation of it.

The stigmatisation also causes the children to raise many questions about what attitude they are to adopt to their religion in their everyday lives. The children request forums where they, together with people who are experts in Islam and are able to answer questions, have the opportunity to discuss their thoughts about not only religion, identity and place in society, but also violent Islamist extremism and how the extreme propaganda relates to the true messages of the religion.

The children are of the opinion that the mosques and their representatives could play such a role. At the same time, the children feel that the stigmatisation means that representatives of the religion do not dare to talk about violent Islamist extremism due to the fear of being labelled as terrorists themselves.

The terrorist attacks in the West in recent years have resulted in many new laws, policies and programmes aimed at countering the “new terrorism”. Research indicates that the link between Islam, extremism and terrorism often made in these contexts affects Muslims collectively.⁴¹ Several Nordic countries have action plans to counter violent extremism that focus greatly on the threat from the Islamist milieu. Foreign terrorist fighters, religious communities, refugees and asylum seekers are the groups these national plans devote a great deal of attention to. The action plans are therefore based on dividing the world into the democratic West and “the other” Muslim world.⁴² The UN Human Rights Committee has also criticised Sweden as a result of the frequent negative portrayals of Muslims in the media.⁴³

Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child says that the rights shall be ensured for every child, that the state shall protect every child from racism and discrimination. Under Article 6, children have the right to grow up in an environment that promotes their opportunities to develop to their full potential and to develop their own identity. This also encompasses a requirement that children have the opportunity to receive guidance on how to exercise their rights.

The Ombudsman for Children believes that the stigmatisation of Muslims experienced by the children implies that Sweden is failing to protect children and young people from discrimination. The children’s accounts also indicate that stigmatisation leads to them not receiving the guidance on how to practice their religion that they would like and is an important part of the process of creating their own identities and of their development into adulthood. We argue that Sweden is also failing to ensure these children’s right to the best possible development.

⁴¹ See, for example, Guru, Surinder, Under Siege: Families of Counter-Terrorism, *British Journal of Social Work*, 2012, 42, pp. 1151–1173; Kundnani, Arun, Radicalisation: the journey of a concept, in *Counter-Radicalisation: Critical Perspectives*, Baker-Beall, C. Heath-Kelly, C. & Jarvis, L. (Eds.), 2014.

⁴² Sivenbring, Jennie, *Demokratiseringens dilemman i de nordiska handlingsplanerna mot våldsbejakande extremism* (Democratisation's dilemma in the Nordic action plans to counter violent extremism), Gothenburg University: Segerstedt Institute, 2017, p. 3.

⁴³ UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of Sweden, 2016, point 16.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has pointed out that the process of creating and expressing your identity is especially complex for children who are making a path for themselves between minority cultures and dominant cultures.⁴⁴ The committee draws attention to the fact that the obligation not to discriminate requires the state to actively identify children for whom the recognition and realisation of their rights may require special measures.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 20: on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, 2016, point 10.

⁴⁵ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 5: General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2003, point 12.

Support

The children tell their stories

The aim of the government commission the Ombudsman for Children has been given is listed as preventing children from harm. Consequently, an important aspect of our conversations with children and young people has been finding out what support is needed by children and young people who have been affected in various ways by violent Islamist extremism. In our conversations with the children, we have talked both about the support needed by children and young people who are at risk or have become involved in violent Islamist extremism and about what society needs to do in terms of prevention in areas where it is more common for children and young people to join this type of milieu.

Religion as a healing force

One recurring theme in the children's accounts is the contrast between the messages and actions advocated by violent Islamist groups and the values and outlook of Islam. One child, whose close relative has been involved in violent Islamist extremism, explains:

“So there’s a lot of talk about like programmes for people who want to break free, which I think is a really, really bad idea. What is it exactly they are supposed to be breaking free from? [...] Are they supposed to be breaking free from the religion or is it these groups?”

This child is expressing here a resistance to people confusing Islam and violent Islamist extremism. Another child, who knows people who have been involved in violent Islamist extremism, says that it is instead important for children and young people who have been radicalised to be given more information about Islam:

“Show them the true path of Islam ... because they’ve learnt the wrong side. Those are the people you can help, that’s what I think, with rehabilitation and show them what Islam really is. [...]”

According to this child, knowledge about what Islam really stands for can help those who are radicalised distance themselves from violent Islamist milieus.

Both children who have experience themselves and children who know someone who is or has been involved in violent Islamist extremism discuss how support interventions must aim to get those who have been radicalised to leave violent extremism rather than “leave” the religion as such.

The children also state that the religion itself may act as a healing force in this process because violent Islamist groups’ motives are not consistent with the actual message of the religion.

At the same time, almost all of the children are clear that the deradicalisation process is not just about learning the Qur’an in the “right” way. Kaysan explains:

“It’s not enough to just have meetings all the time. These meetings have to give you something. You can’t just say ‘this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong’. Listen.”

Dounya agrees: *“Help to think right. Help to not think [...] Help to see another side of the world, that ... That they haven't seen. Yes. Not just this little bubble.”*

Here the children are explaining how someone who has become involved in violent Islamist extremism also needs help to examine and discuss the thoughts and driving forces that lay behind them turning to violent milieus in the first place. The children are requesting social contexts in which young people can discuss their thoughts without these being automatically condemned and where there is someone who is able to help them get these thoughts in order.

The importance of trust in those who provide support

Both children who have experience themselves and those who know someone who is or has been involved in violent Islamist extremism indicate that there are few people who they trust and are able to get support from in the process of leaving violent milieus.

The children have no unequivocal answer to the question of who the key people can be in terms of supporting those who want to leave violent Islamist extremism. However, what is clear is that this must be someone who the child trusts.

Some children argue that family, friends and others who are close to them are the most important support for those who have become involved in violent Islamist extremism. Manaar has a friend who travelled abroad in order to fight for Daesh and talks about the period before the friend left. They do not think that anyone other than the friend's parents would have been able to prevent what happened:

“I don't actually think so. Because they really don't know him that well. They don't know him as well as his parents do.”

As Manaar describes it, the family, in their capacity as close relatives of the child, are those who are best able to reach the child and get them to change their views.

Jarah, who has themselves been involved in violent Islamist extremism, also discusses how the family is an important support:

“Even if you're wondering about things, have thoughts, like you talk to your parents, that's also what I would say. Because I didn't do it. [...] If I had done it, my parents would have explained to me in a bit more detail about this and like 'this isn't right' and what not [...].”

Jarah feels that their parents could have stopped them from turning to violent Islamist extremism. They had chosen not to talk to their parents, but looking back in the “rear-view mirror”, now believe that it would have been a good idea to tell their parents what they were thinking.

Many of the children are thus of the opinion that it can be a good idea to talk to their family, at the same time as a number of them say that this can feel difficult. Mousa, who travelled abroad to fight, before returning to Sweden, tells us:

“Lots of them tried, yeah. But I didn’t want to talk about it. Because ‘if I talk about it, you’ll get sad. And then I’ll get sad as well. That’s why I can’t talk to you’.”

Mousa’s story indicates that they want to protect both themselves and their family from becoming unhappy. A child not wanting to burden their family may pertain to a fear that they will take offence or that the family’s reactions may be difficult to deal with when combined with their own depression.

Mousa continues:

“With someone who’s been there, then I can talk. Yeah, then I can sit for ten hours and talk, yeah. But if I’m with someone else, impossible.”

Mousa does not feel he has the same responsibility to “filter” their experiences when with someone who has similar experiences. It is easier to talk to and get support from someone who can relate to and understand what they have seen and been involved in.

What Mousa is describing is something that comes up repeatedly in the accounts of several children who have their own experience of or know someone who has been involved in violent Islamist extremism.

Several of the children with more direct experience also say that it is not possible for just anyone outside of their family to be the one providing support. One child talks about when they were given a liaison officer who was to support them in the process of leaving violent Islamist extremism.

“This liaison officer, you know it was just some random woman, she knew nothing about what I ... It was a Swedish woman, she knew nothing about this other problem and all that. So she can’t help me with ... Like she knows nothing about Islam and stuff, so she can’t help me, can’t say to me ‘this is right, and this is wrong’ because she doesn’t know about stuff like that.”

This child is emphasising that if a support intervention is to be meaningful, the support has to come from someone who is able to understand the child’s situation on a deeper level and has knowledge of the questions and thoughts the child has.

Social services’ lack of knowledge

When we have asked the children what various actors in society can do to help children and young people who have been involved in violent Islamist extremism, it is interesting to note that social services – which have a statutory duty to ensure that children and young people receive the support and assistance they need⁴⁶ – are either completely absent from the children’s accounts or are not perceived to be an actor that is able to help these children and young people.

⁴⁶ Swedish Social Services Act, Chapter 2, Section 1, para. 1 and Chapter 5, Section 1.

Those children who have had contact with social services as a result of they themselves or someone they know having been involved in violent Islamist extremism indicate this was a not a positive experience. One child describes the meeting they had with social services when they returned from travelling abroad to join Daesh:

“And then he said, ‘Yes, but we don’t actually know how we are going to deal with terrorists like you and stuff. We don’t know what we are going to do.’”

This child bears witness to the fact that social services are more or less at a loss as to what they could do to help them in the process of distancing themselves from the extreme milieus they were previously part of.

Jarah, who has experience of having travelled abroad to join an Islamist terrorist group, describes how they could have been more involved in the interventions they were the subject of when they returned to Sweden:

“So, it’s me who knows what I need and stuff, need in terms of help. But she (the social worker) wrote things down herself on a piece of paper and gave it to the liaison officer. These weren’t things I agreed with. These were things that she wrote herself, and she used really long words and stuff. So it wasn’t my own words.”

Jarah feels that they could have talked about their needs, but did not feel they were being listened to when the support was being formulated. Nor did they recognise themselves in the social worker’s descriptions and instructions to the liaison officer.

Social services’ bewilderment, combined with the child’s lack of involvement, indicates that a lack of expertise may have an impact on both the way the child is treated and on the design of the interventions themselves.

Teaching children to think critically

The children we met highlight the importance of supplying children and young people with tools that make them resistant to the messages of extreme groups. Irsa explains:

“So I really have to know why they fight. And I can’t just look online at ‘why is Iraq fighting against Daesh’. There’s a load of different explanations without a reliable source.”

Kaysan explains it in this way:

“[...] I want to get taught more about this in school, religious subjects just, tell us how it actually came about. You don’t get to hear so much about it there you know. And if you don’t have this knowledge, the first, best thing you hear will sound right, simple as that.”

The children argue that a lack of knowledge about how to critically appraise sources is an important reason why children and young people are receptive to the violent Islamist groups’ rhetoric. Both children who have experience themselves and children who know someone who is or has been active in violent Islamist groups emphasise that one of the most important

support interventions for children and young people is teaching them to think critically. This applies both to the simplified messages about Islam used by the extreme groups and to mass media and social media in general.

At the same time, the children discuss how the problem will not be solved by providing this knowledge in isolation. There also have to be discussion forums where everyone is welcome to express their views and where adults can respond to arguments and answer questions, even those that are controversial. One child explains:

“Let people discuss things. Even if it’s something that sounds really, really extreme, let people discuss it so that there can be the sorts of discussions where different thoughts can come in and you can deal with them together. [...] and don’t exclude them from these different places, demonising them directly by saying ‘you discuss that, so that means you’re a terrorist’ or whatever. Welcome them instead. Be open to discussion.”

Providing a space where opinions and attitudes can be expressed allows these to be confronted, challenged and considered. The child continues:

“Otherwise, it’s just this sort of one-way communication, you just listen. But, instead, if you have a place, a café, a mosque, for example, or something, you can get answers to these questions.”

The child argues that there must be two-way communication, where the young people’s own questions, thoughts and opinions are taken seriously and responded to by knowledgeable adults. Young people must be excluded from important and existential questions that may arise with regard to religion. The child is describing how this is something that young people need to do together with adults.

Jarah, who has been involved in violent Islamist extremism themselves, says the following when we ask what they were in need of when they turned to violent Islamist groups:

“Yes, working together with these imams in the suburbs and then saying to them ‘talk about these things’, and getting to meet an imam. And you have to talk about it, you know you have to educate these young people ... Muslim young people about their identity, that we have our culture, but we are also part of this society, so that you don’t get so influenced by this.”

Jarah is talking about the importance of the support also including identity creation processes that relate both to religion and to what attitude to adopt, as a minority, to the majority society.

The role of schools

Schools are generally absent from the descriptions of who could potentially provide the interventions that children call for in order to improve their knowledge. However, some do mention that this should be talked about more in schools, for example in conjunction with religious and social studies.

“But instead, when the school, they can change it. They can show the real side of ... They can show them what Daesh is really like. Loads of people think that Islam ... you know, Daesh is fighting for

Islam. But that's not true. They've just made it up that God sent them to fight for the sake of Islam", says Irsa.

Children believe that school is a powerful force with a mandate to show the other side, how things “really are”. At the same time, the children’s accounts indicate that questions pertaining to violent extremism’s relationship to religion do not appear to be something they talk about within the scope of teaching.

On the whole, there are few children who talk about school of their own accord. The children appear to believe that a school’s task is primarily to convey measurable knowledge rather than democratic values. However, if the knowledge is to be meaningful, it must come from someone the children trust and feel has legitimacy in the subject matter.

“When I was in school ... when someone visited, like it wasn't ... so it was just someone who works in the mosque. It could just as well have been someone who, you know, cleaned the place or something. But it was someone from the mosque, thought the school, and so this person knows. So if you had questions and then it was more ‘I can't answer that’. And there's nothing wrong with that, but there's some questions that are maybe more important to have answers to”, says one child.

Prevention in the area

The majority of the children and young people who have joined violent Islamist milieus come from vulnerable areas, which, according to the police are characterised to a large extent by segregation, crime and low socioeconomic status.⁴⁷ The children themselves relate the risks of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism to the vulnerability in their area.

“Many of these soldiers from Daesh are from the suburbs. And there, for example in these areas and so on, it's total chaos. And the authorities and the government know about it, but still they don't do so much about it. And lots of people feel excluded. Loads of my friends who were born in Sweden don't feel like they're Swedish. I wasn't born here, I feel really Swedish. But ... yeah, lots of people feel excluded. And ... yeah, I don't know, have more of a presence in the suburbs. And show them that there are other opportunities aside from crime and ... yeah”, says one child whose friends have been involved in violent Islamist extremism.

Children say that many people feel a sense of exclusion in relation to others in society and that they feel they lack opportunities. The children think this may make people more receptive to the violent Islamist groups’ messages, which, for some, offer a sense of context and belonging.

On the basis of what the children describe, it is clear that an important aspect of efforts to counter children and young people becoming involved in violent Islamist milieus is prevention.

The sense of exclusion also relates to how the media and other people portray the areas in which the children live. Irsa tells us:

⁴⁷ Swedish Police Authority, *Utsatta områden – Social ordning, kriminell struktur och utmaningar för Polisen* (Vulnerable Areas – Social Order, Criminal Structure and Challenges for the Police), 2016, p. 10.

“There’s a lot of bad things said in the media about these areas. The smaller suburbs. There’s a lot of bad things said about them in the media.”

The children think that the rest of the world’s negative views of their areas needs to be given nuance. They would like others to be able to see all the positive things about their areas that they see and there should therefore be a focus on initiatives that can make more people visit and stay in these areas.

The children have many thoughts and ideas about what could be improved in these areas and they argue that children and young people have advanced knowledge and perspectives that adults lack.

Raheem explains: *“They have to, you know, listen to us. Young people don’t feel like a part of this. They have never been allowed to join in.”*

According to the children, one factor that would help interventions in these areas succeed would be for decision makers to listen more to what children and young people think.

Questions about participation and influence crop up frequently in the children’s accounts with regard to the situation in these areas; what could be done to improve the area and to prevent children and young people turning to crime or extremism.

Improve safety and reduce crime

The children want to see a change in terms of the crime and violence in these areas. They feel unsafe and want to get rid of the criminals.

“[...] they (the police) have to catch one after another”, says Kalila.

The children’s accounts indicate that many feel that the authorities and decision makers have “given up”, that they think that it is not possible to do anything about the situation anyway. For example, the children describe how the police and ambulance service often fail to respond to emergencies in the area, or they arrive too late. Nevertheless, the children have ideas about what would make the area safer:

“They have to do better, like, more cameras, you know more ... like, safer in the area. It’s not as safe now, because the police only go when something happens. It takes ages for them to come. The person is able to escape”, describes Aishah.

The children want there to be more monitoring of the area, for example using security cameras, and they feel that the police do not always intervene when they are needed. Nima talks about similar experiences with the police:

“And they should take care of more things. [...] They are like ... Yeah, if someone has been shot here, then they think ‘yes, but in five minutes he’s still dead’. They should still try to get here quickly. They are after all allowed to cut through the traffic with those lights”

Although some of the children talk about their lack of trust in the police, they still want a police presence in the area:

“I've seen police officers, who are real police officers, they drive in with the car and then drive away again. You know, they don't look, they just look to see if something has happened and then leave. But they should be here for like a half hour. And then go. And then move on to the next one. [...] And then there should be police officers who like live here in the area. Who are here for ... or in all areas, there was like five police officers in every area. Then every day they work, they worked outside, their job is just to go out, look around, stay until evening then go home, like that. Simple”, says Aishah.

The children describe how they would feel safer if there was a more substantial visible police presence in the area, police officers who were more actively involved in talking to children and young people. They would also like to see police officers with roots in the area, preferably through living there themselves.

“I don't think that the social can get better, but I think that the police should get better, that they like are here at the right time, because there's so many of them”, says Nima.

At the same time as the children want to rid the area of crime and violence, they demonstrate their understanding of how those who are drawn to crime and violent milieus are people who do not feel they are being noticed, who do not believe they have a chance.

“So, there's you know different reasons why they want to go there. They maybe have trouble in their family, or they just want to. I don't know. It's maybe possible to help them, I don't know. Show that that they are there, that we are there for them. Then they have like a place in society, you can show them that they also have a voice that matters. [...] These kids from the suburbs, they're, you know, immigrants. They're from different countries, they're not Swedish. And then, they think more like this, that they don't have a chance. For example. Yeah, they don't have a chance to work and be who they want to be. So they'd rather turn to crime. Because no one wants them”, says Eshal.

The children emphasise that it is important to show children and young people that there is an alternative future; that drugs, crime or joining violent extreme groups is not the only option available.

“And the boys, you know, they have no future. They get bad grades in school, they can't get a job. [...] More job opportunities for them. Because you know, they've got no other option than like robbing and doing criminal stuff, so this is the only way they go. You can help them like this, a university where you can like get those who are criminals to like get an education”, argues Kalila.

Those who do not see any alternatives to crime need support and help, for example through education. Kalila explains:

“This thing with putting them in prison, that's not the best idea. They don't learn there. They are kids.”

Role models and physical places

A recurrent theme in the children's accounts that is associated with the prevention of crime and violent Islamist extremism is the importance of role models. Eshal tells us:

This thing where people who have lived in the area, or maybe still live there, but that they have a good job here, good education, and where they come and talk about what they did. Then they've been in the same situation. Similar situations. But still came, came out of it well."

Children talk about the importance of people who young people can identify with and are able to show them that it is possible to create a better future for yourself. The children also talk about existing role models and supportive adults.

"Youth leaders, they help young ... young people not to end up on the street and stuff. They are also really good role models here. [...] Mostly them at the recreation centre. They are ... I go there sometimes to get help with homework. They are really good with young people. [...]", says Dounya.

Dounya is talking here about youth leaders who work at a recreation centre in their area and who they perceive to be a role model and available for children and young people and able to support and help them.

In addition to adult role models, the children are also looking for more places for children and young people. Kaysan talks about when the recreation centre in the area where they grew up closed down because the municipality thought keeping it open was too expensive.

"So this place vanished, and they ended up outside. 'OK, where are we going to go now? I knew what I would do in there, but what do I like do in the real world?' Some of them turned to drugs. I have friends who started selling and also using. Some others turned to these extreme groups. [...] So you need to have these recreation centres. They are so important. Lots of people think that 'it's a good place for people to hang out'. No, but it's a place where you get an identity, you get a role as well."

Kaysan is describing recreation centres as an alternative to the destructive milieu into which many people would otherwise be drawn. Several other children say similar things about recreation centres and those who work there:

"[It's good to have] youth centres because they help you with homework, for example. Or they, I don't know, they help you, you know children. And yeah, they do a lot and they have lots of meetings with young people and show them what is wrong ... and what they want to do. And help them. And, for example, young people from here, I've seen lots of them who already have jobs and go to good schools because, for example, the youth centre helps them", says Eshal.

As described previously, some of the children mention there has been recruitment taking place at recreation centres in their areas, but it is clear that, to the children, recreation centres also represent a safe place where there are activities to keep them entertained in their free time. There are adults present who are not only able to function as role models, to pep them up and

support them on a day-to-day level, but also see each child as an individual and help them when they are having difficulties. To the children, recreation centres become a place to make new friends, to feel involved and to create a context.

The Ombudsman for Children's analysis

Participation and individually adapted interventions

Under Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and young people who have become involved in violent Islamist extremism have a right to recovery and social reintegration. The interventions the child receives shall be provided on the basis of Article 3, which states that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all decisions that concern children. In other words, Article 3 implies there is a requirement to assess what is best for the child in each individual case with the aim of providing the child with individually adapted interventions. One prerequisite for this is that the people who are to make these assessments have the knowledge and expertise required to understand the specific situation and needs of the child.

Article 12, which pertains to the child's right to participation through forming and expressing their views and having them taken into account in all matters that concern them, is also important to how interventions for children are designed. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has emphasised that there is an inextricable relationship between Articles 3 and 12. One is about realising the best interests of the child, the other indicates the procedure for hearing the child's views and taking them into account in the assessment of what is in the best interests of the child. According to the committee, it is not possible to apply Article 3 correctly if the requirements of Article 12 are not met.⁴⁸ The right to participation also appears in the Social Services Act (2001:453), which says that the social welfare committee's interventions shall be designed and implemented with the agreement of the individual.⁴⁹

Children and young people who have had contact with social services because they themselves or someone close to them has been involved in violent Islamist extremism describe how social services, which is responsible for providing support and interventions for children and young people⁵⁰, lack knowledge of the situation they are in. They also state that they have not been included in the planning of interventions. All in all, the children have not received the support to which they are entitled.

The Ombudsman for Children believes that society must ensure that the principle of the best interests of the child forms the basis of and serves as guidance in all decision-making processes pertaining to interventions for children and young people who have become involved in violent Islamist extremism. We argue it is important that social services have knowledge of violent Islamist extremism and the situation that these children and young people find themselves in if their needs are to be met in full.

The Government has taken steps to improve the knowledge of violent extremism among those actors that come into contact with children and young people who are affected by this in

⁴⁸ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 14: on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration, 2013, point 43.

⁴⁹ Swedish Social Services Act, Chapter 3, Section 5.

⁵⁰ Under Chapter 2, Section 1 of the Social Services Act, social services in each municipality is ultimately responsible for ensuring that individuals receive the support and assistance they require.

various ways.⁵¹ The Ombudsman for Children welcomes the action that has been taken, but in the light of what the children describe, we argue that it is vital to monitor what effect this work has had. There should also be a follow-up to determine what, if any, further action is needed in order to ensure that actors working with children and young people who have become involved in violent Islamist extremism have the necessary expertise to meet these children's needs and provide them with the support they require.

The Ombudsman for Children also believes that the child's right to participate in the planning and implementation of interventions needs to be strengthened. Research that has examined what significance participation in child welfare cases has on the protection and support children receive shows that when the child has not been able to express themselves and given an opportunity to influence how the problems are described, the design of the intervention does not suit the problems that has emerged during the assessment. However, when the child has been able to express themselves and has had the opportunity to influence how the problems are formulated, the intervention is better suited to the problems that have emerged during the assessment. One conclusion is that the child's opportunities to influence how the problems are described increases the likelihood that the intervention will be well suited and that the child will have access to their rights.⁵²

The Ombudsman for Children believes that the children must be able to participate in describing their problems from the very beginning when it comes to interventions for children and young people who have become involved in violent Islamist extremism. We argue that this will lead to more suitable interventions that meet the child's needs and ensures their rights.

Cooperation with civil society

When we have talked to children and young people about what kind of support children who have become involved in violent Islamist extremism need in order to leave the extreme milieus, the children have stressed the importance of guidance from within the Islamic faith. According to the children, the process of leaving violent Islamist extremism is not about "breaking free" from the religion. Instead, it involves coming closer to the religion by learning what it actually stands for, not what the extreme groups' propaganda claims. The children are clear that an understanding of and ability to relate to the existential questions encompassed by the religion are important factors in breaking free from Islamist extremism.

In Sweden, the dominant view of the state as value neutral has made a strong impression on the public sector. We have a secular state in which the public sector has to remain neutral to religion and between religions. However, research has discussed what this value neutrality

⁵¹ See, for example, Uppdrag till socialstyrelsen att utarbeta stöd för socialtjänsten i ärenden som rör våldsbejakande extremism (Commission to the National Board of Health and Welfare to produce support for social services in cases pertaining to violent extremism) (Ku2015/01385/D), Uppdrag till Statens institutionsstyrelse att utveckla det förebyggande arbetet mot våldsbejakande extremism (Commission to the National Board of Institutional Care to develop preventive efforts to counter violent extremism)(Ku2016/02296/D) and Uppdrag till Kriminalvården att utveckla arbetet mot våldsbejakande extremism (Commission to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service to develop its efforts to counter violent extremism) (Ju201606988/KRIM).

⁵² Heimer, Maria, Näsman, Elisabet, Palme, Joakim, Rättighetsbärare eller problembärare? Barns rätt att komma till tals och socialtjänstens insatser (Bearer of rights or bearer of problems? Children's right to express themselves and social services' interventions), Stiftelsen Allmänna Barnhuset, Uppsala University, 2017, pp. 39 ff.

entails for the democratic state. For example, some research points out that a strictly secular ideal is not capable of differentiating between religion that is disrespectful and generates conflict and religion that is not. The consequences of this are that all religion is excluded and the potential positive impact of religion on social development fails to materialise.

As mentioned previously, the opportunity to exercise the right to freedom of religion and receive guidance in this is an important aspect in the creation of a child's identity and their development into adulthood. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the state shall make it possible for the child to exercise their right to freedom of religion in a way that promotes the child's opportunities to reach their full potential and develop their own identity.⁵³

The importance of cooperation with civil society organisations is something that is advocated in various contexts in the debate concerning society's efforts to counter violent extremism, in particular in the National Strategy Against Violent Extremism.⁵⁴ The Government has also taken action to strengthen cooperation between municipalities and civil society organisations. For example MUCF has produced, on behalf of the Government, a guide that sets out how municipalities and civil society can work together against violent extremism.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities has been tasked with deepening the dialogue it undertakes with faith communities that want to develop their support activities for young people, parents and relatives who are affected by violent extremism.⁵⁶

The Ombudsman for Children believes, just as with initiatives to improve the knowledge of actors that come into contact with children who are affected in various ways by violent extremism, that it is vital that the Government follow up the action that has been taken. There is a need to review what structures for cooperation with faith communities and faith-based organisations there are within, for example, social services, how these function and to what extent further action is required.

We also believe that civil society organisations can play an important role when it comes to preventing children and young people from becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism, with this role being linked to the opportunity they have to report their concerns to the social welfare committee. According to the Social Services Act, employees of public authorities whose activities affect children and young people have an obligation to report their concerns that a child is being harmed.⁵⁷ Other actors who learn that a child is being harmed should also report this.⁵⁸

We argue that adults within civil society organisations who come into contact with children and young people have good chances of detecting signs that a child may be in need of

⁵³ Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 6 and 14.

⁵⁴ National Coordinator Against Violent Extremism, *Nationell strategi mot våldsbejakande extremism (National Strategy Against Violent Extremism)*, 2016.

⁵⁵ Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, *Knäck koden! En vägledning om hur kommuner och civilsamhälle kan arbeta tillsammans mot våldsbejakande extremism (Crack the code! A guide for how municipalities and civil society can work together against violent extremism)*, 2017.

⁵⁶ Appropriation directions for the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities for 2015, 2016 and 2017.

⁵⁷ Swedish Social Services Act, Chapter 14, Section 1.

⁵⁸ Swedish Social Services Act, Chapter 14, Section 1 c.

interventions on the part of social services, either because they are themselves at risk of becoming radicalised or because someone close to them has become involved in violent Islamist extremism. Consequently, the Ombudsman for Children believes there must be assurance that adults who come into contact with children understand how important it is to always report their concerns. These adults need to be given information about what social services are able to help with and the importance of reporting concerns.

Support for families

In our conversations, children and young people have pointed out that parents and other close relatives are decisive in terms of preventing children from becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism. Children discuss how it is family members who are best placed to reach the child. The children believe that the principal responsibility for supporting the child is that of the parents and other close relatives.

At the same time, children describe how it is not always easy to talk to family. The child may want to protect their family from becoming sad or taking offence if the child talks about their experiences. The children also state that the reactions of family members may be difficult to deal with in combination with the thoughts and deliberations the child is grappling with. In this way, the children's accounts indicate that the family, in particular the parents, may also be in need of targeted support if they are to meet the child's needs and provide them with support.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the family as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the development and welfare of the child. In the light of this, the convention attributes to the parents primary responsibility for the child's upbringing and development.⁵⁹ The parents shall provide the child with appropriate direction and guidance when the child is exercising their rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. At the same time, the convention also stresses the state's responsibility to assist the parents in various ways with the fulfilment of this responsibility.⁶⁰

The ability of the family to play a significant role for children and young people who have become involved in violent Islamist extremism is highlighted in material including a report from the European Commission's Radicalisation Action Network (RAN). This report stresses that the definition of family may vary between individuals and it is therefore important to make an individual assessment of who is included in the child's network and what support they can provide the child. According to RAN, it is important to use a holistic approach that does not simply focus on interventions for the parents but includes both siblings and others close to the child as well. RAN also emphasises the importance of multidisciplinary interventions and of the support needing to be designed on the basis of the family's needs. The way in which the family is able to support the child may vary along with a range of factors such

⁵⁹ Fifth paragraph of the preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

⁶⁰ Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 5 and 18.

as financial resources, housing conditions, the parents' mental health and whether or not the parents have jobs.⁶¹

Something that has not cropped up in our conversations with children and young people, but which is highlighted by RAN and other actors, is that the child's family may also be involved in violent Islamist extremism and is perhaps even the reason why the child has been radicalised. In this case, the family may therefore constitute a risk factor, which must be taken into account when assessing which interventions will be used for the child and their family.⁶²

On the basis of both a children's rights perspective and the children's accounts, the Ombudsman for Children believes that support interventions targeting children and young people who have become involved in violent Islamist extremism must encompass the entire family and not just the individual child. This may involve support to enable the resumption of dialogue within the family when children and young people have been involved in things that may be difficult for them to discuss with their parents. This may also involve parents needing to gain confidence that their child can get help and support through the agency of the state. We are also of the opinion that there is a need for support for parents who have children that are at risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism.

Schools' democratic remit

In our conversations, the children have stressed the importance of children and young people being taught to think critically and being given tools that make them resistant to the messages of extreme groups. The children also call for discussion forums where everyone is welcome to express their views and where adults can respond to arguments and answer questions, even those that are controversial. Providing a space where opinions and attitudes can be expressed allows these to be confronted, challenged and considered. In this respect, it is interesting that school is generally absent from the children's accounts.

Swedish schools' democratic remit is laid down in the Swedish Education Act (2010:800). Education shall convey and secure respect for human rights and fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society rests.⁶³ The curriculum for compulsory schools makes it clear that inviolability of human life, the individual's freedom and integrity, the equal value of all, equality between women and men and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are the values that schools are to establish and convey. It also underlines that xenophobia and intolerance must be met with knowledge, open discussion and active interventions.⁶⁴

In spite of schools' explicit democratic remit, there are few children who address the role of schools. When we have asked what function schools could fulfil in efforts to counter violent

⁶¹ Radicalisation Awareness Network, Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Approaches and Practices, 2017, p. 313.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Swedish Education Act, Chapter 1, Section 4, first paragraph.

⁶⁴ National Agency for Education, Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet (Curriculum for compulsory schools, the preschool class and leisure-time centres), 2016 (Lgr 11).

Islamist extremism, it emerges that the children appear to perceive schools' remit as being primarily to convey measurable knowledge rather than democratic values.

According to Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the child's education shall aim to develop their respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, for the child's own cultural identity, their own language and their own values and for cultures that differ from that of the child. The child's education shall also prepare them for a responsible life in a free society in a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and people who belong to indigenous populations.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasise that some of the importance of Article 29 is specifically that it recognises that there needs to be a balanced attitude to education; that different values can be reconciled through dialogue and respect for differences.⁶⁵ The values conveyed through education must not undermine actions to promote the enjoyment of other rights and should instead reinforce these. According to the committee, education must be implemented in a way that respects the child's inherent dignity and makes it possible for the child to express their views freely in accordance with Article 12.⁶⁶ The committee also underlines that education about human rights is only able to shape children's motivation and behaviour when human rights are also practised within the institutions where children learn, play and live together with other children and adults.⁶⁷

The fact that schools are able to play an important role in efforts to counter violent extremism are supported by research, a recurrent theme of which is schools' capability to respond to extreme views using dialogue. Research indicates that schools need to use educational methods, standpoints and democratising values in order to include those who do not feel their views are being taken seriously. Opportunities to talk about politics and ideas should be offered, even those that may be perceived as controversial in relation to the accepted norms and values upon which education is built. However, research also shows that on the contrary, schools tend to silence and disregard extreme views expressed by young people rather than confronting them.⁶⁸

The children's accounts make it clear how important it is for the professional adults in the children's everyday lives to have the expertise to deal with and support children as they exercise their freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression. We are of the opinion that a central aspect of schools' work to promote democratic values is meeting children's needs in terms of forums for dialogue. Accordingly, the Ombudsman for Children believes that it is important to ensure that staff in schools are provided with the support they need to enable them to also deal with those pupils who express

⁶⁵ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 1: The Aims of Education, 2001, point 4.

⁶⁶ Ibid, point 8.

⁶⁷ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard, 2009, point 108.

⁶⁸ Sivenbring, Jennie, Demokratiseringens dilemman i de nordiska handlingsplanerna mot våldsbejakande extremism (Democratisation's dilemma in the Nordic action plans to counter violent extremism), Gothenburg University: Segerstedt Institute, 2017, p. 27.

extreme views. Staff in schools also need support to enable them to use controversial questions as an educational resource.

We argue that school health services, primarily through the work of the school welfare officer, can play an important role in this respect. The school welfare officer's remit involves introducing psychosocial work into schools as a means of contributing to ensuring that all pupils achieve the learning objectives and develop socially and emotionally in an environment that promotes learning. The school welfare officer's role includes working with the school's efforts to promote fundamental values and crisis management as well as supervising teachers in psychosocial matters.⁶⁹ The Ombudsman for Children believes there must be clarification that the remit of the school health service encompasses providing support to teachers and other members of staff on matters that pertain to violent Islamist extremism.

Interventions in vulnerable and particularly vulnerable areas

Under Article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the state shall make it possible for every child to develop to their full potential. As we have returned to several times in this report, our view is that Sweden is failing in terms of ensuring this right for children and young people who are growing up in vulnerable and particularly vulnerable areas. The children's accounts show that the environment in these areas in which children are growing up may lead to some children thinking that they lack opportunities and that their only options are destructive milieus, crime and violent Islamist extremism.

Our conversations indicate that important aspects of efforts to stop children and young people becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism are promotional and preventive interventions in these areas. The children argue that society must demonstrate to children who are growing up in vulnerable and particularly vulnerable areas that there is a bright future, that drugs, crime or joining violent extreme groups are not the only options available to them. The children also discuss the importance of participation. This involves both being able to feel that you are part of society on the same terms as children who are growing up in other parts of Sweden and having the opportunity to be involved in making an impact on the situation in the area – being listened to and taken seriously. The children have many thoughts and ideas about what could be improved, and they discuss how children and young people in these areas have advanced knowledge and perspectives that adults lack.

Something the children call for explicitly when it comes to the situation associated with crime and violent Islamist extremism in these areas is more physical places for children and young people. Examples mentioned are recreation centres where there are both recreational activities and a place where they feel they are participating and creating a context. According to the children, this type of safe place can constitute an alternative to the destructive milieus to which many would otherwise be drawn. The children also stress the importance of adult role models who can show them that it is possible to create a brighter future for yourself.

⁶⁹ Akademikerförbundet SSR, Policy för skolkuratorer (Policy for school welfare officers), 2015.

The significance of working with promotional and preventive interventions in vulnerable areas is something that is advocated in various contexts. In a report from 2015, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe highlights proposed measures from the former ombudsman for children in Belgium, Bernard de Vos.⁷⁰ He is of the opinion that decisive elements in efforts to counter violent extremism are fighting discrimination, segregation and marginalisation among all children and young people, regardless of their socioeconomic background. We must ensure that all children have equal opportunities and a sense of purpose and utility. He names education as a resource for integrating children at an earlier stage, including specific teaching about democracy, as well as building partnership programmes at the local level by mobilising municipalities and supporting and encouraging the police, social services, schools and other institutions to interact with children and young people directly.⁷¹

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has stressed that children and young people's development is strongly influenced by the environment in which they live.⁷² One important aspect of this is the availability of places for children and young people to spend time. In light of Article 31, which deals with the child's right to rest, leisure, play and recreation, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has pointed out that public planning must prioritise the creation of environments that promote children's well-being.⁷³ The committee stresses that the design of such environments have to take into account the desires and capabilities of children.⁷⁴ It is important that children are able to contribute their perspectives, for example when designing schools, playground, parks, leisure and cultural facilities, public libraries, healthcare facilities and local transport systems, in order to ensure that these services are more appropriate.⁷⁵

As mentioned previously, the committee has in its recommendations to Sweden in recent years put forward its concern regarding differences between municipalities that lead to children's access to support and services being inequitable.⁷⁶

The Ombudsman for Children believes that the state must target specific attention at improving the situation in vulnerable and particularly vulnerable areas. This is of great importance both to ensure the rights of the children and young people who are growing up in these areas and as one aspect of efforts to prevent children and young people becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism. We also believe that children in particularly vulnerable areas should be given more influence in the design and improvement of their area.

⁷⁰ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Preventing the radicalisation of children by fighting the root causes, 2015.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 4: Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2003, point 14 ff.

⁷³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 17: on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts, 2013, point 58.

⁷⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard, 2009, point 115.

⁷⁵ Ibid, point 128.

⁷⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Sweden, 2015, point 11.

The Ombudsman for Children's proposals

Our conversations with children and young people indicate that there are no simple answers to the question of why children and young people become involved in violent Islamist extremism. There are complex cause and effect relationships in which factors at the individual and societal level interact and reinforce on another. Our conclusion is that on the basis of a children's rights perspective, there are a number of measures that are important in order to prevent harm being done to children and young people who are affected in various ways by violent Islamist extremism.

The Ombudsman for Children would like to see the following changes:

Take exposure to violence seriously

- **Adopt a combined national action plan concerning violence against children**
- **Task authorities with involving children and young people in their work to combat violence**

Under Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the state has a duty to protect the child from violence. The children's accounts indicate that Sweden is failing to protect children and young people who are growing up in vulnerable and particularly vulnerable areas from violence.

As pointed out by both the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and Unicef, research shows that children and young people who grow up in communities that are characterised by extreme and chronic violence are at greater risk of becoming perpetrators of violence themselves, both as children and as adults.⁷⁷

The Ombudsman for Children believes that a decisive aspect of preventing children being harmed by stopping them from becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism is to take their exposure to violence seriously. We believe that the Government should draw up a combined national action plan for preventing and stopping violence against children within all sections of society.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that the state shall protect the child from *all* forms of violence. We are of the opinion that an action plan concerning violence against children should not focus solely on exposure to violence in vulnerable and particularly vulnerable areas, instead it must adopt a broad approach and focus on the situation of children and young people and their right to protection from all forms of violence. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child list examples of the violence that is encompassed by the definition in Article 19 and that should be included in the action plan, namely corporal punishment, domestic violence, witnessing violence, structural and economic violence, bullying and various

⁷⁷ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 13: The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence, 2011, point 14; Unicef, Hidden in plain sight: A statistical analysis of violence against children, 2014, p. 8.

forms of psychological violence, sexual violence, honour-related violence and harmful customs such as child marriage and genital mutilation.⁷⁸

The Ombudsman for Children also believes that the public authorities that are allocated duties within an action plan concerning violence against children must involve children and young people in the planning and implementation of both reactive and preventive measures. This is because children and young people are experts in their own situation and have the right to express themselves and participate in both society and their own lives.

Strengthen the role of social services

- **Ensure that children and young people who have been involved in violent Islamist extremism participate in the planning and implementation of initiatives and support from social services and that social services have sufficient knowledge to make assessments of what is in the best interests of the child in these situations**
- **Concerns that children and young people are at risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism must always be reported to the social welfare committee**
- **Ensure that there is support for parents of children and young people who are at risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism and for families of children who have joined violent Islamist milieus**

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and young people who have been involved in violent Islamist extremism have a right to recovery and social reintegration. Interventions shall be provided on the basis of the principle of the best interests of the child and the child shall participate in the planning and implementation of interventions with their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.⁷⁹

Children and young people who have had contact with social services because they themselves or someone close to them has been involved in violent Islamist extremism describe how social services, which is responsible for providing support and interventions⁸⁰, lack knowledge of the situation they are in. The children also state that they have not been included in the planning of interventions. This combination has resulted in them not feeling they have received the support to which they are entitled.

In order to ensure that interventions are better suited to children and young people who have become involved in violent Islamist extremism, the Ombudsman for Children believes that there must be assurance that social services have the expertise required to make assessments of what is in the child's best interest that are based on knowledge of how children and young

⁷⁸ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 13: The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence, 2011, point 17 ff. The committee specifically emphasises that this list is not exhaustive.

⁷⁹ Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 3, 12 and 39.

⁸⁰ Under Chapter 2, Section 1 of the Social Services Act, social services in each municipality is ultimately responsible for ensuring that individuals receive the support and assistance they require.

people are affected by violent Islamist extremism. The child must also participate from the very beginning in describing the problems when it comes to support and interventions.

An important tool for identifying children who are at risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism or who are living close to a relative who has been radicalised is the opportunity to report concerns to the social welfare committee.⁸¹ The Ombudsman for Children believes there must be assurance that adults who come into contact with children – such as representatives of faith communities, staff at youth centres, sports coaches, etc. – understand how important it is to always report their concerns. These adults need to be given information about what social services are able to help with and the importance of reporting concerns.

Children point out that parents and other close relatives are important people in terms of the support they can provide to children and young people who have become involved in or are at risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism.

In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the parents are primarily responsible for the child's upbringing and development. The parents shall provide the child with appropriate direction and guidance when the child is exercising their rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. At the same time, the convention also stresses the state's responsibility to assist the parents in various ways with the fulfilment of this responsibility.⁸²

The Ombudsman for Children believes that support interventions targeting children and young people who have become involved in violent Islamist extremism must encompass the entire family and not just the individual child. The support provided must be based on the needs of the family and aim to both provide the family with the tools to deal with and support the child and to ensure that the needs and rights of parents, siblings and other close relatives are satisfied. Support must also be offered to parents of children who are at risk of becoming involved in violent Islamist extremism. Accordingly, a central aspect of the interventions provided to the child and their family is cooperation between the home, the child and social services.

Boost schools' democratic remit

- **Ensure that schools' efforts to promote democratic values meet children's needs in terms of providing forums for discussing difficult issues, including violent Islamist extremism**

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child has a right to freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression.⁸³ Connected to these rights is the child's right to express themselves and have their views taken into account

⁸¹ According to Chapter 14, Section 1 of the Social Services Act, employees of public authorities whose activities affect children and young people have an obligation to report their concerns that a child is being harmed. According to Chapter 14, Section 1c of the Social Services Act, other actors who learn that a child is being harmed should also report this.

⁸² Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 5 and 18.

⁸³ Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 13, 14 and 15.

in relation to their age and maturity.⁸⁴ The opportunity to exercise these rights is an important aspect in the creation of a child's identity and their development into adulthood.⁸⁵

Our conversations with children and young people make it clear how important it is for the professional adults in children's everyday lives to have the expertise to deal with and support children as they exercise their freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression. The children we talked to also call for dialogues where everyone is welcome to express their views and where adults can respond to arguments and answer questions, even those that are controversial. However, few children mention schools, despite the fact that schools have an explicit democratic remit.⁸⁶

The children's accounts make it clear that a central aspect of schools' work to promote democratic values is meeting children's needs in terms of forums for dialogue. The ability to talk about difficult issues is generally important, but it is our view that in areas where there is violent Islamist extremism, it is of particular importance that these issues are discussed in schools.

The Ombudsman for Children believes that school health services, primarily through the work of the school welfare officer, can play an important role in terms of providing support to teachers so they can deal with pupils who express extreme views and are able to use controversial questions as an educational resource. We therefore believe that there must be clarification that the remit of the school health service encompasses providing support to teachers and other members of staff on matters that pertain to violent Islamist extremism.

⁸⁴ Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12.

⁸⁵ Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 6.

⁸⁶ Swedish Education Act, Chapter 1, Section 4.