



ENGLISH VERSION



THE SWEDISH NATIONAL  
BOARD FOR YOUTH AFFAIRS  
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# YOUTH AND YOUTH POLICY

– A SWEDISH  
PERSPECTIVE



## **Preface**

This compendium, *Youth and youth policy – a Swedish perspective*, defines various concepts that are used when discussing youth policy or young people as a group. It is not an in-depth analysis, but rather is intended as an introduction to youth policy.

The text is written in a Swedish context and is thus naturally based on Swedish conditions. As the text is intended to be used for discussions on youth policy between countries, it introduces a number of characteristics that are used in international comparisons.

The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs and the Department of Youth Services at the Directorate for Youth and Sports in Turkey were working together in the project *Youth Policy Cooperation between Turkey and Sweden* between 2008 and 2010. This compendium was produced within the cooperation project.

In this text Sweden's views on young people and youth policy are described by Inger Ashing, director for National and municipal youth policy at the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs.

# Youth and youth policy – a Swedish perspective

## Characteristics of youth policy

### Defining young people

Young people are a heterogeneous group, whose most common denominator is their age. But age-wise the group is characterised by differences, as it includes 13 year-old secondary school pupils as well as 29 year-old young adults with their own homes, jobs and families. Besides age, other factors that can set young people apart are their gender, whether they were born abroad or in Sweden, if they have a disability and whether they live in a city or a rural area.

The primary target group for Swedish youth policy is the 13–25 age group, but other age groups may also be affected. There are many words that describe this period: child, teenager, youth, young person, young adult and so on, which can sometimes be confusing. In Sweden there are over one and a half million young people aged between 13 and 25.

### Phase of life or social category

Youth can be defined either as a *phase of life* or as a *social category*. Phase of life refers to youth being the period between childhood and adulthood. The transition to adulthood can be marked by being fully grown, finding one's own identity, being able to support oneself or forming a family of one's own. Social category means that young people are a group with common needs, interests and characteristics and that they encounter similar structures and are affected by the same societal institutions and rules. The life phase perspective focuses on people's youth as compared to the rest of their life and to other generations, while youth as a societal category focuses more on the conditions during youth and within the category of young people.

### Changed phases of life

Social development during the post-war period has changed and shifted the relationship between different phases of life. People in Sweden live much longer than they did 50 years ago. They attend compulsory education for a much longer period, and the transition between education and gaining a permanent foothold on the labour market takes increasingly longer. Women's participation in the labour market has increased significantly, and starting a family and having children now takes place later in life. Together, these shifts have led to a change in when certain phases of life occur in people's lives and also in how long the various phases last. Naturally, a description of these phases is very sketchy and general, and hides the fact that some changes are not unambiguous and that a large percentage of the population does not follow the course of events described here. However, such a description can still serve as a basis for analysing changes in the structural conditions for growing up in our society.

If childhood is viewed as the period before puberty, then this period has actually shortened by about a year during the post-war period. Physically, children become adults earlier. At the same time, children have access to communication (TV, radio, newspapers, internet etc.) and also travel extensively. Thus, they know much more about the surrounding world than children in the same age group did a mere 30 years ago. Youth can be seen as a phase which involves gradually liberating yourself from your parents, and can be defined as the time between the onset of puberty until you move away from home. This phase of life has grown slightly to include younger people and over the last decade the upper age limit has expanded as well. The following phase is where you are formally considered an adult but have not formed a new family yet. We can call this phase “young adulthood”. This phase can be seen as a period of freedom, but is also characterised by a large number of life choices where you gradually take on various adult roles, choose further education and a career, decide where to live, look for a life partner etc. Having children is usually the last step in this establishment process. The upper age limit for young adulthood has increased gradually to include older people. The reasons for this include increased demands for education and an increasingly complicated and drawn out transition from education to the labour market, and probably also changing attitudes toward starting a family and having children.

### **Youth**

Youth can be seen in a number of different ways, which result in different youth policy strategies. Views of this period can be split into different phases. Youth can be seen as a *transitional phase*, a *socialisation phase*, a *struggle for social status* or as a *period with intrinsic value*. There are differences between the different views, but they should not be exaggerated. Swedish youth policy has elements of all four of these views, but the latter two have the strongest influence.

When we discuss the extended period defined as youth, the basis for our discussion is youth as a *transitional phase*: you are in your youth while you wait to grow up, and adulthood is put off to an increasingly high age. One example of this is different political initiatives aimed at young people establishing their own independent life by getting a job and moving away from home. These initiatives are focused on both making youth a good period, and on moving on and growing up. One common motive for the welfare policies aimed at young people is to raise them into responsible adults. A large part of Swedish youth policy is about seeing youth as a transitional phase. School legislation and regulations for grants to youth organisations contain wordings about young people being trained in a democratic way of thinking. The development of society’s support for young people’s leisure pursuits and social activities is partly based on preventative motives. These are clear signs that youth is also seen as a *socialisation phase*. If youth is seen as a *struggle for social status*, the focus is on identifying which societal structures hinder the development of young people and to act to change these. One example of this is ensuring that young people have access to various forms of education or welfare systems. Another important area is representation. Initiatives to increase the number of young people in decision-making bodies can be seen as an indication that this view prevails. The view of youth as a *period with intrinsic value* is common. From a Swedish youth policy perspective, it is natural to see youth as a period that is valuable in itself. Young people are seen as a resource and not as a problem. The two last phases, youth as a *struggle for social status* and as a *period with intrinsic value*, have a clear focus on young people having knowledge and experiences that enable them to take part in society on equal terms with other groups.

### **Different conditions and prerequisites<sup>1</sup>**

There are major differences in conditions between different groups of young people. Some examples from 'The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs' latest indicator report, Ung idag 2009, show that certain groups of young people do not have the same opportunities as others. Young people with foreign backgrounds reach educational goals and qualify for further education to a lesser extent than young people with a Swedish background. Young people born abroad are often worse off financially than young people born in Sweden, and they find it harder to establish themselves on the labour market. Young parents, especially single parents, are one group that is worse off financially than others. Young people born abroad who have children are extra vulnerable. Young people with disabilities are another group that experiences difficulties on the labour market compared to other young people, as are young people with a low degree of education, who are disadvantaged compared to young people with a high degree of education. Indicators also show that girls and boys are vulnerable in different areas. Girls are worse off than boys when it comes to mental health, work-related diseases, income, financial aid and compensation for reduced capacity for work. Boys do less well at school and a lower percentage of them are highly educated. They are victims of and take part in criminal acts to a greater extent, and more are hospitalised and killed as a result of violence. A larger percentage of boys also display a greater degree of risky behaviour in most public health surveys. Boys are also involved in more workplace accidents, debt claims, debts, evictions and long-term unemployment than girls. Indicators also show geographical differences between counties and municipalities regarding the number of young people who have moved on to higher education or have debt claims, debts and evictions.

We are born into a world that already exists. We do not choose our parents, do not choose when we are born, which country we grow up in or what gender we have. Because conditions vary considerably depending on which social class our parents belong to, which generation we are born into, which ethnic group we belong to and if we are born a boy or a girl, society has a responsibility to create socially fair conditions for growing up. One important purpose of youth policy is to improve the living conditions of young people.

### **What does youth policy mean?**

There is no common, accepted, definition of what youth policy is or what it includes. Each country has its own national policy and decides what is to be considered youth policy. However, below we attempt to define youth policy.

Youth policy has various tasks. One youth policy problem is how to combine society's responsibility with the ambition to let young people decide over their own lives. Young people are dependent on adults; not just for their material prosperity, but also for their spiritual development. However, it is important that youth is not associated with dependency and adulthood with independence. There is a mutual dependency between young people and adults.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of the conditions of young people in Sweden in 2009, see Ung idag 2009 (The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs 2009).

### **A definition of youth policy**

The concept of youth policy was first used formally in the 1990s. As far as we know, the concept has not been defined unambiguously in a document from the Riksdag or government. There is also a great degree of obscurity about how the term youth policy is used, as it can denote a number of different phenomena. In this section we attempt to clarify how the concept of youth policy can be defined.

Young citizens are affected by many aspects of social policy, above all by education, leisure and NGO policies. But areas like housing policy, criminal policy, healthcare policy, labour market policy, integration policy, equality policy and rural policy, to mention a few, also affect the living conditions of young people to a great degree. One characteristic of the expansion of the welfare state is increased differentiation and specialisation of the public sector in Sweden. This can be seen in the creation of an increasing number of political areas, for which various agencies are responsible. An increased sectorisation has taken place. Young people are, perhaps to a greater degree than others, the object of various public initiatives. This means that issues important to the living conditions of young people can be found in many different sectors. The development of a state youth policy can be seen as a reaction to this sectorisation, where the ambition was to create a comprehensive perspective based on the individual situation of each young person and to facilitate cooperation between different sectors.

One common definition of youth policy is that it is the sum of all the initiatives aimed at young citizens, everything that affects young people in any way. This could be the result of youth policy today being spread across many different sectors and the large number of actors in the area. Such a definition is only a summation after the event, a result of the effects of the general policy on a certain target group, and is not an expression of a conscious political will. By including everything, it also becomes a blunt instrument for analysis. How can you tell the difference between good and bad youth policy? Youth policy as a concept becomes void.

The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs defines youth policy as an expressed political ambition for the living conditions of young people. In today's public system, political ambition is usually expressed in various kinds of goals or desirable outcomes. The expressed political ambition for national youth policy in Sweden is the goals, perspectives and main areas that have been determined by the Riksdag and government. It is their content that specifies and delimits youth policy.

Youth policy is a cross-sectoral or horizontal policy area that affects several sectors. The policy area as such is not responsible for the funds necessary to achieve the political goals. Instead, policy implementation must take place via the vertical sectors/policy areas that control the resources. For example, there are specific youth issues in housing and labour market policy, like grants for student housing or labour market initiatives for young people. In order to clarify these concepts we would like to define these kinds of issues as sector-specific youth issues, initiatives in a sector that affects young people in some way.

## **Swedish youth policy from an international perspective<sup>2</sup>**

In order to clarify the content of youth policy, we will examine Swedish youth policy from a European perspective. It is hard to accurately compare the development of youth policy between Sweden and other countries. Initially it is important to remember that Swedish youth policy has developed over a long period of time, since the 1950s. In many other countries, youth policy is a much newer area.

In the following section, we compare Swedish youth policy with youth policy in other countries. Our ambition is not to be comprehensive; instead a number of cases will be discussed. Comparisons will be made based on the definition of young people, the view of young people and youth, and whether there is a youth policy sector. Finally, any distinctive features of Swedish youth policy will be highlighted.

### **Who is youth policy for?**

The age range of youth policy varies between countries. The target group identified in the white paper, which serves as a guide for European cooperation on youth policy, is young people between 15 and 25. In international law and statistics there is a clear definition of young people as being between 15 and 24. However, this definition does not apply in the national youth policy of all countries. In some European countries, children and young people over 24 are also considered young people, and child and youth policy is the same thing. There are many countries that include people up to 30 years of age in the group defined as young people. Other European countries separate child policy and youth policy. In these countries the policy areas overlap to a certain extent, as child policy applies to people who are underage and youth policy applies to teenagers and young adults. In Sweden the target group for youth policy is between 13 and 25 years old.

### **Young people as a problem or a resource**

Another way of comparing the youth policy work of various countries is to find out how they view young people. To put it simply, there are two perceptions of young people and they decide what the youth policy motives are: young people as being in a problematic situation because they are young, and young people primarily as a resource. The idea that young people are in a problematic situation is based on them being vulnerable, in danger and in need of protection. They are vulnerable because of the conditions of their childhood, personal circumstances or other social conditions. If, on the other hand, young people are seen as a resource, this means that young people not only will be valuable in the future; they are already valuable in their status as young people. They can contribute to society with their knowledge of what it is like to be young. Based on this perspective, young people are seen as responsible for their actions and competent enough to take responsibility. Both perspectives are represented in the youth policies of virtually all countries, with the main difference being which perspective is the most dominant.

In the European countries that have a long tradition of a combined child and youth policy, the problem-oriented perspective has often dominated. The countries in which young people are viewed as a resource in society are often the countries where youth policy is a relatively new policy area. Sweden belongs to the latter group.

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<sup>2</sup> This section is a summary of Adrienne Sörbom's chapter "Svensk ungdomspolitik i ett europeiskt perspektiv" (Swedish youth policy from a European perspective) in UNG 2003 (The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs 2003).

### **One youth policy sector**

In some countries youth policy is delimited well from other political sectors, with a defined department in charge, its own legislation and its own administration. In other countries, youth policy is spread between several sectors (school, care, culture, health and so on). In yet other countries, there is virtually no youth policy sector and only a small degree of national coordination on youth policy. The countries that have a clearly defined youth policy sector often have a slightly narrower political focus. Items included are usually youth organisations and leisure time, while issues such as education, housing and health often are not included. In countries whose youth policy sector is not defined as narrowly, there is often a greater inclination to work cross-sectorally.

The view of youth policy as a political sector affects work at a national level in the various countries. There is a connection between how narrowly defined the youth policy sector is and how centralised youth policy is. In the countries that do not have a youth policy sector there is little coordination of youth policy. In countries with a clear and organised youth policy sector there is usually a department responsible for the coordination of youth policy on a national, regional and local level. Sweden is at an intermediate level when it comes to national coordination.

### **Characteristics of Swedish youth policy**

It is hard to make straight comparisons between countries because of the differences between the target groups for youth policy, the dominating view of young people, and the way youth policy is organised. However, five tendencies can be discerned if Swedish youth policy is compared to that of many other European countries.

Firstly, Swedish youth policy is characterised by being mostly aimed at young people between 13 and 25 years of age, and by the fact that it differentiates between child and youth policy. Another characteristic is that Swedish youth policy is broader than that of many other countries, in that it includes many different areas and is cross-sectoral. Welfare issues have a natural place in Swedish youth policy, not just club activities and education issues. Thirdly, we can see that Swedish youth policy bears clear signs of the postwar welfare policy in Scandinavia. This is a universalist policy, that wants to give all young people the opportunity to establish themselves as independent adults. In many other countries, youth policy applies to certain groups who are considered in need of special initiatives. However, a shift of perspective can be seen in Swedish youth policy, as the government and Riksdag now emphasize more clearly that these initiatives should specifically include disadvantaged young people. A fourth characteristic of Swedish youth policy is the will to see young people as a resource, which affects how the policy is framed. Instead of seeing youth as a problematic time that is full of dangers and that young people must navigate as best they can, Swedish youth policy emphasises that this phase of life has an inherent value. The initiatives prioritised are primarily those that can support young people in their own choices, combined with initiatives for especially vulnerable groups, like young people who are far from the labour market or live in high-risk environments. A fifth characteristic of Swedish youth policy is that there is a youth minister and national goals for youth policy. Sweden also has a state agency, The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs, that is responsible for coordinating and following up national youth policy. However, the autonomy of the Swedish municipalities means that Swedish youth policy cannot be controlled by the state. If they wish, the municipalities can base their work on the national goals for youth policy work, but the final shape of youth policy is decided by the individual municipalities.



### **The emergence of youth policy in Sweden<sup>3</sup>**

This final section describes the emergence of youth policy in Sweden, and the main content of this policy.

Swedish youth policy – as a delimited and independent policy area – is a relatively new phenomenon, although it has quite a long history. Two of the most important areas for the emergence of modern youth policy are the formalisation of the school system, and the organisation of leisure and club activities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For a long time, these areas constituted youth policy. The view that youth policy mostly involved issues about the leisure time and club-organised activities of young people dominated well into the 1960s. It was not until the 1970s that a shift came, from a sector-defined youth policy to a more comprehensive policy. Today's youth policy, which is based around the entire situation of young people and involves many different political sectors, started taking shape only 30 years ago.

Several inquiries and official letters have addressed the most important youth policy issues over the last few decades, and on several occasions work groups and committees have been appointed to suggest how youth issues should be coordinated. The development within the UN has been an important influence on Swedish youth policy. The UN proclaimed an International Youth Year in 1985, which in many ways was a starting point for a broader and more active state involvement in youth issues in Sweden. In 1986, a youth minister was appointed for the first time and during the 1990s and early 2000s the government has presented three youth policy propositions with goals and guiding principles.

Today Swedish youth policy includes all the areas of politics that affect young people's lives in any way. Both traditional youth areas such as leisure activities and school, and typical welfare issues such as work, housing and health have their place in youth policy.

It is convenient to describe the growth of youth policy in terms of several parallel lines of development. At the state level, youth policy has followed the general development of Swedish public policy as a whole. The Swedish state works with result-oriented management, which means that the Riksdag and government not only define goals, but also follow up the results achieved. At the municipal level, development in youth policy issues has primarily consisted of various kinds of projects aimed at developing the influence of young people in municipal politics, and around municipal cooperation. Both at state and municipal level, there is a distinct aspiration for a comprehensive approach and a cross-sectoral work method.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth exposition, see Ung 2003, The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs publication 2003:6 p 41-46, and Svensk ungdomspolitik – en underlagsrapport inför en bedömning inom Europarådet (Swedish youth policy – a preparatory report for an assessment in the Council of Europe), 1999, The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs report no. 14.

## **The content of Swedish youth policy**

The national youth policy is aimed at all young people and promotes equal opportunities and fair conditions for young people. This means that factors like gender, foreign background, cultural or socio-economic background, age, place of residence, sexual orientation or disability should not affect young people's opportunities. In order to achieve equal opportunities and fair conditions, youth policy initiatives should primarily be aimed at those young people who have the worst conditions.

For a long period of time, youth policy has been universal in that it has, at the national level, primarily been based around initiatives for all young people. Of course, this has been combined with targeted initiatives in social policy or other areas. However, the approach has always been general, with a policy that does not single out certain groups as higher priority than others. The current youth policy states that initiatives should primarily be aimed at disadvantaged young people. This is a clear shift in perspective. Today's policy highlights the large minorities in the population of young people. This is similar to the starting point for youth policy in the 1950s and 1960s, when the arguments for having a youth policy were to prevent young people from becoming alienated or ending up in the wrong company. One important difference is how young people are perceived by society. The view of young people as a resource, which has emerged over the last 20 years, is one of the most important aspects of Swedish youth policy. Viewing young people as a resource means that they are not only valued because they will eventually become adults, but also because they are young today. Young people can contribute to the development of society with their knowledge and experience of what it is like to be young. The view of young people has changed considerably, which means that it can be problematic to compare today's youth policy with the previous policy.

## **Goals and perspectives for Swedish youth policy**

In autumn 2004, the Riksdag passed a new youth policy bill, *Makt att bestämma – rätt till välfärd* (Power to decide – right to welfare). The two overarching goals for national youth policy are:

- Young people should have real access to influence
- Young people should have real access to welfare

These goals are aimed at young people being able to affect the development of society in general as well as their own lives and their local environment. This includes being able to influence aspects of their everyday lives, like their home, school and work environment, their circle of friends and their family. But they should also be able to influence the priorities of society. Young people should have influence because it is a right in itself, but also because their knowledge and experiences are valuable resources for society. The welfare goal is aimed at young people having access to a good material, cultural and social standard of living. Young people should also have good conditions for good physical and mental health. They should be protected from discrimination and other forms of abusive behaviour and from being subjected to crime and bullying.

There are several important aspects of the living conditions of young people that are difficult to formulate as goals. Instead, these have been highlighted in the youth policy bill as important perspectives and attitudes. There is no authority with specific responsibility to apply these perspectives; it should be done by all authorities. The Riksdag and government have determined four perspectives that decision-makers should always presuppose when shaping public activities for young people:

- The resource perspective
- The rights perspective
- The independence perspective
- The diversity perspective

The resource perspective means that the unique knowledge and experiences of young people should be utilised. The rights perspective means that young people have the right to good living conditions, for example good health and social and financial security. This also means the right to be involved in and affect their own lives, their local environment and the development of society in general. The independence perspective means that public initiatives should support young people's opportunities for independence. In order to achieve independence, access to knowledge and financial resources are needed, but also freedom from discrimination. Independence means both liberation from parents and the absence of restrictive factors such as addiction, constraint and oppression. The diversity perspective refers to awareness that all young people are not the same simply because they are young. In our coordinating, managing and following up on youth policy, it is important to remember that youth policy affects many different kinds of people – with different prerequisites, needs and desires.

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# THE SWEDISH NATIONAL BOARD FOR YOUTH AFFAIRS

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The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs is a government authority. We work to ensure that young people have access to influence and welfare. We do this by producing and communicating knowledge on young people's living conditions. We also distribute funding to the civil society in the form of support for organisations, projects and international cooperation. All the support we distribute is given on behalf of the Swedish government.



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