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Comparing population views on state responsibility for children in vulnerable situations – the role of institutional context and socio-demographic characteristics

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines populous perspectives of the government's responsibility to intervene in situations of possible parental neglect of children in England, Finland, Norway, and California (USA), and ask if institutional context, defined as child protection system and children's wellbeing situation, are formative for people's perspectives on government responsibility for children in vulnerable situations and how they view children's future. With representative samples of populations responses to a survey vignette using ordered logistic regression, findings indicate that the institutional context shed some light on differences on state responsibility. However, similarly to welfare state research, there are differences and contradictions in important dimensions that require further investigation, especially on citizens perceptions of neglect and on intrusive interventions. Citizens with a comparatively higher education are evidently much more supportive of state responsibility for children and child protection interventions than other citizens. This finding is similar to those of other studies of state responsibility. Overall, there is a high level of support in populations for the provision of public services to children and families in vulnerable situations.

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populations; child protection; institutional context; England; Finland; Norway; California (USA)

Introduction

This paper examines the population's perspective of the government's responsibility to intervene in situations of possible parental neglect of children. The responsibility that governments have for children who are in vulnerable situations was formulated in the 1989 United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).¹ All nation states in the world, except the USA, have ratified the CRC and its principles. Article 19 of the CRC formulates the explicit and clear obligation that states must intervene if parents are negligent or maltreating their children

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1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child. (CRC Article 19, section 1).²

However, how and when this responsibility is actualized differs widely between nation states (Berrick, Skivenes, & Roscoe, [in press](#)). There is very little cross-country research and information about the thresholds for when the responsibility of the state is or should be actualized, how far the state's responsibility reaches, and what the consequences for the children are or might be.

In this study, we contribute to filling the gap in the literature related to these questions and examine the population's views and sentiments on three child protection themes: if there is a problematic situation, if the state should do something, and what are the potential consequences for the children. In a comparative study of child protection professionals (frontline staff and judicial decision makers) and populations in California (USA), England, Finland, and Norway (Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2020), an overall alignment is revealed between the decision makers and populations within each country. Berrick and colleagues (2020) show that there are differences between countries, but they do not investigate the possible explanations for these country differences. In this paper, we use the survey data material on populations from Berrick et al. (2020) to examine a) if and to which degree institutional context, understood as child protection system and with children's welfare positions in society, shed light on the similarities and differences in the protection of children between states. Furthermore, b) if socio-demographic factors are correlated with how populations consider the responsibility of the state in child protection and the possible consequences for children who grow up under nonideal circumstances.

In the following, our theoretical approach and research is presented. The child protection systems in the four countries are outlined. The methods and our findings are then described and we end with discussion and concluding remarks.

Theory and existing research

Policy theory is the basis for this study, and it can be associated with the policy feedback literature (i.e., policies affect politics over time, as shown by Béland, 2010) and policy responsiveness theory (i.e., politicians are aware and incentivized by the population's preferences on policies, as shown by Brooks & Manza, 2006). A basic premise for both these branches of policy theory is that public opinion is regarded as an independent variable that explains, or has an impact on, politicians and subsequently how policy is developed. In our

approach, public opinion is regarded as a dependent variable, in which policies and welfare institutions influence citizens' attitudes and their perspectives on the role and status of the welfare system (see also Svallfors, 1996, 2012; Valarino, 2017). The institutional and cultural contexts that people are embedded in are regarded as formative for their perspectives on what should be a collective responsibility and how society should be built. The welfare state literature shows an ongoing discussion about how institutional-cultural contexts and individual preferences and attitudes are formed and about how such factors are related to the policy choices people make (Svallfors, 2012; see also Valarino, Duvander, Haas, & Neyer, 2018). Child protection is an aspect of the welfare state model in a nation state with a strong element of control because it has the authority to make intrusive interventions into family life and restrict individuals' rights. The individuals in a society are embedded in institutional, cultural, and normative systems that influence how one thinks and proceeds in a range of issues (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). According to our framework, the general welfare standards, living conditions, and rights orientation in a society are factors that impact on people's values and views. Family and parenting values include the tacit knowledge of lived experiences. Often this knowledge and these experiences are not made explicitly available for discussion and examination. This societal and institutional context shows that the embedded values and understandings of children, families, and ways of doing things may be in alignment with or in direct opposition to the rights prescribed in the UNCRC. Corporal punishment and child marriage are two examples of cultural practices that clearly violate children's rights, but both practices are ongoing with varying degrees of popular support around the world (Berrick et al., *in press*; Helland, Križ, Sánchez-Cabezudo, & Skivenes, 2018; Helland, Pedersen, & Skivenes, 2020-a). In our study, we use the child protection system together with children's welfare positions in a society as indicators of institutional context. Empirically, there is little research to draw on because of the scarcity of comparative research on populations' perspectives on and attitudes to child protection. The existing attitudinal scholarship on child protection issues lead us to expect that the institutional context will matter because previous studies of the four countries have shown differences in terms of their citizens' perspectives on adoption from care (Skivenes & Thoburn, 2017), the threshold on what constitutes neglect and on the responsibility of the state (Berrick et al., 2020), and on the acceptability of corporal punishment (Helland et al., 2018, 2020).

The analysis of socio-demographic factors in the welfare state research literature has provided a wide range of correlations in which socioeconomic-related variables, such as education and income, have been more often correlated with specific views on the welfare state. Nevertheless, contradictory findings are reported in the literature, which does not provide a strong basis to build on. The reason for this contradiction, as Svallfors (2012) has pointed

out, is primarily the huge variation in analytical and conceptual approaches to the study of people's welfare attitudes. We believe that the situation is similar within the field of child protection. The studies specifically on child protection systems show that gender, age, political orientation, income, and education matter. For example, in a study of populations confidence in the child protection system in California (USA), England, Finland and Norway, women and individuals over 55 years old show less confidence in the child protection system (Juhasz & Skivenes, 2017), whereas people who are politically left oriented and in the high-income and high education categories have more confidence in the child protection system (Juhasz & Skivenes, 2017). In a study of populations placements preferences in the same four jurisdictions, people aged over 55 years are also less positive about adoptions from care (Skivenes & Thoburn, 2017; see also Helland et al., 2020). As of November 2021, there were no relevant systematic reviews on populations' attitudes to child protection. However, a systematic review on populations' attitudes to restricting individuals' freedoms (Diepeveen, Ling, Suhrcke, Roland, & Marteau, 2013) showed that people were more accepting of restrictions on the behavior of others (in contrast to restrictions on themselves). The review also found that female or older respondents had greater acceptance of interventions (Diepeveen et al., 2013), that restrictive policies already in place had greater support, and policies that targeted children and young people received greater acceptance from the population (Diepeveen et al., 2013). When examining if and how socio-demographic variables have an impact within countries, there are some additional relevant results that we will return to below. In Berrick et al.'s (2020) study using the same data as this study, attitudinal differences between countries were identified in respect to how the populations perceived if children were being neglected, if the child welfare authorities should provide services, and if the authorities should initiate a care order. There were also differences in how the populations perceived the future well-functioning of children and their prospects of employment in adulthood. Our task is to explain these results by examining the influence of determinates at the aggregate level (institutional context) and the individual level (socio-demographic variables).

The institutional context and socio-economic preferences

The regularly performed social studies on attitudes, such as the European Social Survey, typically do not include questions about child protection or rights. Thus, there is little general information available on which to base our expectations. Different countries have established different child protection systems and thresholds for interventions (Berrick et al., *in press-a*; Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011a, 2011b) and also differ in their proceedings for removal of children from vulnerable situations (Burns, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2017).³ The institutional context

for interventions in response to parental neglect or abuse is a country's child protection system, which has the responsibility to protect and secure children at risk, as prescribed by Article 19 of the CRC. Five types of child protection systems on a global scale are distinguished in the literature: e.g., child exploitation protective systems, child deprivation protective systems, child maltreatment protective systems, child well-being protective systems, and child rights protective systems (Berrick et al., *in press*). This typology was developed based on Gilbert et al. (2011b) using an analysis of case studies including 50 countries across the world. The global typology pivots on the degree of risks that a child is exposed to and must handle in his or her society. In countries with a developed public sector and governmental institutions, the latter three child protection systems are operating. We will present these three systems in detail (see also [Table 1](#) below).

Child maltreatment protection systems

Child maltreatment protection systems are focused on family interventions when there is a risk of serious harm to the child. These systems are in place in societies with established societal structures that have a middle- to high-income level. These systems focus narrowly on protection from harm by family members and take responsibility to intervene if the threshold for abuse, neglect, and mistreatment has been reached. A maltreatment protection system has a high threshold for intervention and it is built on the ideology of a noninterventionist state. Thus, the scope for the system is narrow and focuses on the serious risk of harm for children, which reflects a strong family ideology and high threshold for restricting parental freedoms. The USA has such a child maltreatment protection system. In practice, this is also true for England, although its legislation and policies indicate a child well-being protection system.

Child well-being protection systems

Child well-being protection systems are focused on providing services to ensure the protection of children's well-being. This system focuses on a broader spectrum of risks for children and is more concerned with their

Table 1. Overview of conditions for children in the four countries.

Country	Child protection system	GDP Per Capita (2020) ^{a)}	KidsRights index (2020) ^{b)}	UNICEF SDG report (2017) ^{c)}	WHO UNICEF Lancet (2020) ^{d)}
England*	Maltreatment	39 299 (22)	169	13	0.92 (10)
Finland	Rights	48 461 (14)	3	5	0.91 (16)
Norway	Rights	67 989 (4)	14	1	0.95 (1)
USA	Maltreatment	63 051 (5)	-	37	0.84 (39)

- data not available. * For the Kids Rights Index, GDP per capita, the SDG index and the IGME, the measure is for UK (not England). Sources: ^{a)}International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook (2020, November 11); ^{b)}Arts et al. (2020); ^{c)}Brazier (2017); ^{d)}Clark et al. (2020).

developmental opportunities within the family. The parental responsibility to provide for their children is more at issue within this system. The state's responsibility is not only to intervene if the risk for a child is too high, but it is also equally important to provide services that can prevent any intrusive interventions. The first main measure is to provide support to families and only if this support has proven useless, should stronger measures such as intrusive intervention be applied. Belgium, The Netherlands, and Germany are examples of this type of child protection system.

Child rights protection systems

Child rights protection systems have the CRC as its core platform in the sense that the goal is to secure the child's rights as formulated in the CRC. The child is regarded as a moral subject with individual interests and a right to an open future. This system protects children against rights violations; therefore, the child protection responsibilities are broad and comprehensive in terms of providing services to the family, as well as addressing the child as an individual entity in the family (as opposed to being the property of the family or of the parents). In this system, child participation is valued in all administrative and judicial proceedings, together with recognition of children as equal to adults in the society. This system provides a wide array of support services that respond to children as rights-bearing individuals. Finland and Norway are example of systems of this type.

The other component of an institutional context is the children's living standards as understood in a broad sense (children's welfare positions), including the protection of children's rights and sustainability and prosperity for children. The four countries studied here are ranked as high-income countries, but there are still relatively large differences within their living standards in terms of Gross Domestic Product per capita and rankings on measures of children's living conditions (see [Table 1](#)). Overall, Norway and Finland are ranked higher than the UK and USA. In terms of providing for children and adhering to the CRC, the Kids Rights Index measures the child's rights to (1) life, (2) health, (3) education, (4) protection, and (5) enabling an environment for children's rights. Worldwide, Finland is on top, followed by Norway, whereas the UK is at the bottom and the USA is not ranked because it has not ratified the CRC. The sustainable development goal (SDG) index reports on countries' overall SDG progress. UNICEF (Brazier, 2017) has focused on nine goals that they consider crucial for children. We again find that Norway and Finland are ranked higher than the UK and USA. The World Health Organization's *The Lancet* report (Clark et al., 2020) recently published rankings of children's flourishing, with Norway on top, followed by the UK, Finland and the USA. Based on the type of child protection system, children's welfare platform, and empirical research, we obtained the following hypotheses on the topics of neglect, public responsibility, and future consequences.

First, in terms of their institutional context, we expect the populations in Norway and Finland, as compared with those in England and California (US), to have a lower threshold for agreeing that something is neglectful, have higher expectations for the state's responsibilities, and have a higher degree of concern for the future of the children if the state does not intervene. Second, we expect to observe heterogeneity in the demographic variables between countries. Overall, we expect that women, younger persons, politically left-oriented individuals, and persons with higher education to agree to a higher degree that something is neglectful, to be more positive to child protection interventions, and be more concerned about the consequences for the children if there is no state intervention.

Data and method

The study reported here is part of a larger project related to decision-making in child protection funded by the Norwegian Research Council. A polling firm in each of the respective countries carried out data collection with representative samples in each jurisdiction. The total sample size was 4,003. Within each jurisdiction, the sample size was 1000 each in Norway and England, 1002 in Finland, and 1001 in California. In the survey, the respondents were presented with a vignette about a family with possible neglect of two children and asked their perspective on the hypothetical neglect, on what the child protection system should do, and finally on the future of the children if they did not receive any support or help. The vignette and questionnaire were developed by senior researchers with extensive knowledge of child protection, from each of the four countries (see Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2019). The English survey is available here: <https://www.uib.no/admorg/85747/survey-material-legitimacy-and-fallibility-child-welfare-services#> (see population-surveys). The survey questions were developed in British English and then translated into Finnish, Norwegian, and American terms. In Finland and Norway, the surveys were also language tested by individuals unrelated to the research project. The surveys were pilot tested in each of the four countries prior to finalization. An appendix with additional information and analysis of the data material, to ensure transparency in research, is available here: <https://discretion.uib.no/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Helland-et-al-in-press-Comparing-population-views-on-state-responsibility-for-children-in-vulnerable-situations.pdf>

The sampled respondents (18 years old or older) were nationally representative in relation to their observable characteristics (gender, age and location) in the period January–June 2014. Quota sampling was used to secure representativeness and the survey was weighted by the data collection company. For the background questions, we used standard formulations provided by the data collection bureau, Norstat. The researchers did not

receive any identifying data about any study participants. There was no link between survey responses and the participants' identities. A general overview of this type of data collection process can be found at: <https://discretion.uib.no/projects/supplementary-documentation/#1552296903999-5fea5d9a-4dc9>.

The participants were presented with the following vignette about siblings who might need support or supervision from the state:

A principal at a school in your region presents the following case: Jon (11) and Mira (9) are living with their parents. Both mother and father have learning difficulties and mental health problems. The school is very concerned about the situation, and a psychologist has examined the children. She has concluded that Jon and Mira have serious problems with learning and they lack social skills. They are clearly lagging behind their peers, and this is confirmed by their test scores. The psychologist has stated that this is due to lack of stimuli and help from the parents, and the children need a lot of help and support. Further, the psychologist stated that the children lack basic social skills, especially Mira (9). The parents are socially withdrawn and cannot teach and show their children how to behave towards friends and other adults. The psychologist concludes that Mira and Jon are at significant risk of becoming as socially withdrawn as their parents.

The respondents were asked to respond to five statements based upon the limited information provided on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The statements were the following:

- (1) It is likely that Mira and Jon are being neglected by their parents.
- (2) In this situation, a child welfare agency should provide services for Jon and Mira.
- (3) In this situation, the child welfare agency should consider preparations for a care order.⁴
- (4) Without help now, it is not likely that Jon and Mira will lead a well-functioning life as adults.
- (5) Without help now, it is not likely that Jon and Mira will be able to gain employment as adults.

We use two approaches for our empirical analysis: a descriptive analysis of the five statements providing an overview of people's attitudes, followed by an ordered logistic regression analysis to tease out which conditions might explain variation in attitudes. The predicted probabilities are calculated for individuals from each country, while all socio-demographic variables are fixed at its mean value. The data analyses were conducted using Stata software (v. 16.1, Stata Corp, College Station, TX, USA). For the descriptive analysis, we used the full sample of 4003 respondents. We use mean values and standard deviations, and when presenting graphically we merged the values for 1 and 2 into a "disagree category" and for 4 and 5 into an "agree" category. We use a two-sample t-test to see if there are significant differences on the five statements between the country samples at 1% (***) $p < .01$). We also examine

the correlations between statements, expecting those who agree to neglect to also agree to service provision, consider care order, and a negative outcome for the children without help (see Table 1.0A in the Appendix).

To further explore socio-demographic and whether context influence individuals' opinions on the five statements, we use an ordered regression analysis. We include the following explanatory variables; *age* (16–100) and *gender* (female (1) and male (0)). To capture socio-economic status, we use *education* as an indicator because we do not have data on respondents' occupation and data on income is missing for many of the respondents and reduces the sample for the analysis to 2151 observations.⁵ Furthermore, previous research on attitudes and child protection indicates that individuals with higher education is correlated with high socio-economic status (see textbox in appendix for details on this variable). We distinguish between individuals with high education (1) and low education (0). High education includes individuals with university/college education between 1–3 years, 4 years, or 5+ years. Low education includes individuals with secondary or further education, and lower education. *Having children under 18* (yes (1) and no (0)) is included because concerns about children's rights might be stronger among individuals with children. We also include *political orientation* to see whether being more left-wing (1), centrist (2), or right-wing (3) influence attitudes. Lastly, we also include *country* affiliation to Norway, Finland, England and California, US as a contextual explanatory variable (and as a methodological control, country-fixed effect, see below). This is a broad and crude measure of contextual and cultural variation. However, within the four countries, child protection systems differ in supporting families or putting children's rights first (Finland and Norway) or a more risk-oriented system (UK and US), and we believe that these characteristics influence individuals' opinions on the five statements. See Table 3.0A in the Appendix for a descriptive overview of the variables.

Our data is multilevel since we have observations at the individual level (socio-demographic) and contextual level (country affiliation). Having few countries and using a multilevel model approach can lead to unreliable country-effects (Bryan & Jenkins, 2016). To avoid this, we estimate the ordered logistic regression model using country fixed effects. In this model, countries are treated as fixed parameters and not random terms where individual effects are constrained to be equal across countries (Bryan & Jenkins, 2016). The advantage of this approach is that we can assess the net effect of individual characteristics on attitudes across the four countries in the pooled model. The inclusion of country dummy variables also allows us to see differences between the four countries. One drawback to this approach is that it does not allow for the individual characteristics to differ across countries; therefore, we also estimated separate models for each country to allow the estimated coefficients to vary across countries and assess whether any effects varied across the four

countries (see Table 5.1A–5.4A in the Appendix). We use levels of significance at 1% (***) $p < .01$ and 5% (***) $p < .05$, with the awareness that $p < .05$ is at the margin of what is relevant to report) when reporting our empirical findings and whether they support our theoretical expectations.

Findings

Starting with the questions about what people think about Jon and Mira's situation, the child protection system's responsibilities, and the children's future, the results are displayed in Figure 1 and Table 2, and a little less than half of the respondents believe that Jon and Mira's situation is one of neglect. More than eight out of ten respondents support service provision to the children and one third says the government should consider whether a removal of the children is necessary. In terms of the future of the children without state support, about three out of four respondents report that they have concerns about the children's opportunities to live a well-functioning life and around 60% have concerns of their ability to gain employment in the future. The average responses to the five statements are presented in Table 2 and display some variation between the four countries. Additionally, we see that some of the mean differences vary significantly when using a t -test to compare means between two groups (see Table 2.0A in the Appendix).

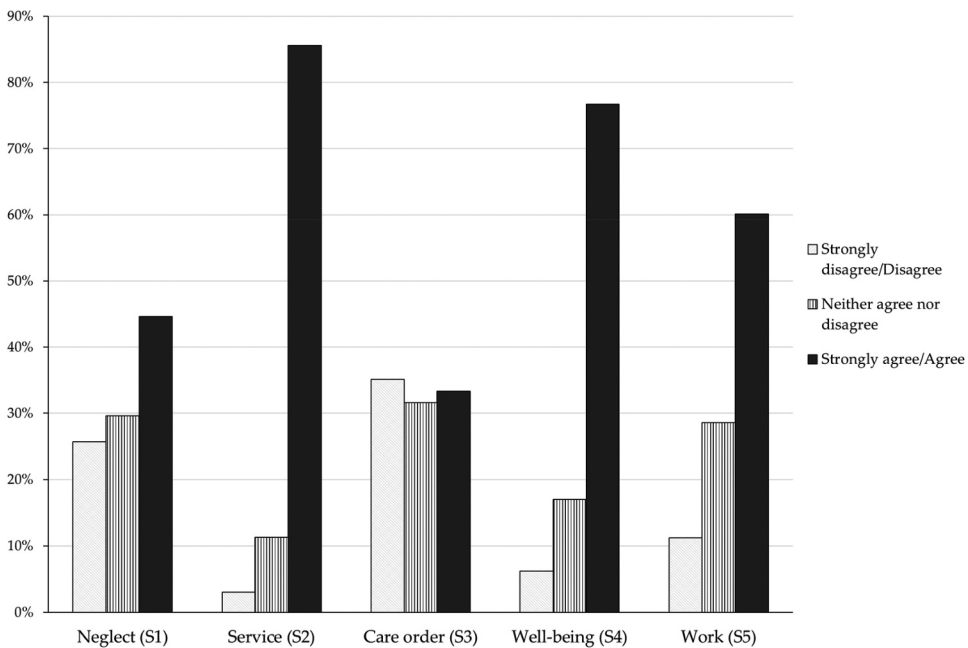


Figure 1. Percentage distribution of responses for all statements ($n = 4003$).

Table 2. Descriptive overview of mean values, pooled sample and per country (median and standard deviation in parentheses).

	Pooled sample (n = 4003)	Norway (n = 1000)	Finland (n = 1002)	England (n = 1000)	California, US (n = 1001)
Neglect (S1)	3.283 (3)(1.008)	3.61 (4)(.896)	3.38 (3)(1.03)	2.97 (3)(1.04)	3.15 (3)(1.20)
Service (S2)	4.224 (4)(0.795)	4.30 (4)(.788)	4.28 (4)(.748)	4.21 (4)(.735)	4.10 (4)(.885)
Care order (S3)	3.004 (3)(1.151)	3.08 (3)(1.204)	2.86 (3)(1.14)	3.20 (3)(1.05)	2.87 (3)(1.26)
Well-functioning (S4)	3.95 (4)(0.847)	3.96 (4)(.781)	3.89 (4)(.852)	4.04 (4)(.808)	3.90 (4)(.932)
Work (S5)	3.659(4)(0.932)	3.59(4)(.900)	3.70 (4)(.914)	3.72 (4)(.887)	3.61 (4)(1.015)

Is it neglect?

When asked if it is likely that Mira and Jon are being neglected by their parents, the findings show that less than half of the respondents (44%) were inclined to agree that Jon and Mira's circumstances could be characterized as "neglect" (see Figure 1). Participants from all countries differed in their responses, with Norwegians being more in agreement that this is neglect than the other populations, followed by Finns, English, and Californians (see Tables 2 and 2A). Further, men agree on neglect more than women, those with higher education agree more than those with lower education, and politically right-oriented people agree more than left-oriented people (all, $p = .01$) (see Table 3).

Are services needed?

A large majority (86%) were in agreement that services should be provided for Jon and Mira in this situation (see Figure 1). All countries differed, with Norwegians being more in agreement that services were necessary than the

Table 3. Ordered logistic regression for all five statements with the pooled sample.

	S1 Neglect(1)	S2 Service(2)	S3 Care order(3)	S4 Well-functioning(4)	S5 Work(5)
Gender (female)	-.207***(.074)	.466*** (.079)	-.301***(.073)	.102(.078)	.024(.075)
Age	-.001(.002)	.006***(.003)	-.001(.002)	.004*(.003)	.004*(.002)
Child/u18 (yes)	.062(.083)	.053(.088)	-.049(.083)	-.181**(.088)	-.131(.095)
Education (higher)	.394***(.084)	.362***(.089)	.373***(.083)	.349***(.088)	.463***(.086)
Political Orientation	ref. category	ref. category	ref. category	ref. category	ref. category
Left-wing					
Centrist	-.074(.104)	-.233**(.112)	-.035(.103)	-.211*(.110)	-.175*(.106)
Right-wing	.254** (.100)	-.027(.108)	.188*(.100)	.017(.105)	.111(.102)
Country	ref. category	ref. category	ref. category	ref. category	ref. category
Norway					
Finland	-.431*** (.101)	-.026(.109)	-.338*** (.101)	-.073(.107)	.316***(.103)
England	-.859*** (.109)	-.200*(.114)	.335*** (.105)	.435***(.114)	.405***(.110)
California, US	-.560***(.105)	-.242**(.110)	-.169 (.105)	.190(.110)	.216**(.116)
N	2439	2439	2439	2439	2439
R-squared	0.021	0.015	0.012	0.009	0.008
Prob > chi2	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$

Note: Table reports coefficients and standard deviation in parentheses.

other populations, followed by Finns, English, and Californians (see [Tables 2](#) and [2A](#)). Further, on demographic background variables, women, older individuals, those with higher education and political orientation to the right, were more in agreement that services are required (all, $p = .01$).

Consider preparing for a care order?

About one third of the sample (32%) stated that the child protection systems should in this situation prepare for a care order (see [Figure 1](#)) and equally share the middle value (that we may interpret as “unsure or I don’t know”) and disagree that its necessary to prepare for a care order. All countries differed, with the English being more in agreement than Norwegians, and both Norwegians and English being more in agreement than Californians and Finns (see [Tables 2](#) and [2A](#)). According to the demographic correlation variables, men agree more than women, and citizens with higher education agree more than those with lower education ($p = .01$) (see [Table 3](#)).

Well-functioning life as adults?

Children experiencing neglect may also experience long-term negative effects in their adult life (see studies of adverse childhood experiences, such as Merrick & Guinn, 2018, and when citizens were asked if, without help in the situation they were in, it was likely that Jon and Mira would lead well-functioning lives as adults. A large majority (76%) did not believe they would lead well-functioning lives as adults (see [Figure 1](#)). This was regardless of whether they believed the children were neglected or not (Berrick et al., 2019). All jurisdictions scored relatively high, with England highest followed by Norway, California, and Finland, and England being significantly higher than the latter two (see [Table 2A](#)). Citizens with higher education were more in agreement ($p = .01$) and citizens without children were less in agreement ($p = .05$) (see [Table 3](#)).

Gain employment as adults?

Asking citizens if, without help in the situation they were in, it was likely that Jon and Mira would be able to gain employment as adults, a majority (59%) did not believe this was realistic (see [Figure 2](#)). All populations scored relatively high on this statement, with the English on top, followed by Finns, Californians and Norwegians (see [Table 2](#)). Finns and the English were significantly higher than Norwegians, and the English were significantly higher

than Californians (see [Table 2A](#)). Citizens with higher education are more in agreement with this concern than those with lower education ($p = .01$, see [Table 3](#)).

In examining the correlations between responses to the five statements, we find that those agreeing that the children are probably neglected also agree that a care order should be considered and that it is likely that there will be a negative outcome for the children in terms of functioning and employment (see [Table 1.0A](#)).

Which factors explain attitudes?

The most consistent result from the analysis is that higher educated individuals tended to agree more on all five statement variables (see [Table 3](#)). Gender is less consistent, where men tended to agree more than women with the statement about neglect (1) and a care order (3), while they agreed less on the service statement (2) (see [Table 3](#)). The country differences are evident on the statement variables for neglect (1), care order (3), and work (5), and are less pronounced on service variables (2) and well-functioning adults (4). Overall, the explained variance for all statement variables is relatively low, indicating that the models do not explain much of the variation in the dependent variables. For example, socio-economic status is measured with one indicator (education), so we are not able to assess whether other dimensions such as occupation or income are better predictors for these attitudes. The institutional context indicator captures broad institutional and cultural differences between the four countries, with the consequence of not being able to assess more fine grained indicators that captures differences in institutional and cultural context.

Estimating an ordered logistic model for each country makes it possible to assess whether socio-demographic factors affect the five statements differently in each country. The results (presented in [Table 5.1A–5.4A](#)) show that some socio-demographic factors better explain these attitudes in some countries. Especially for Norway, Finland, and England, gender and age emerge as key factors (with varying effects on whether men or women tend to agree more, e.g., this is the tendency for statement 2, model 2.1–2.3). While for California, US (see [Table 5.4A](#)), having a higher education is consistently associated with a tendency to agree more with the five statements.

To better understand how individuals from different countries differ in their attitudes on the five statements, we obtain predicted probabilities from the ordered logistic regression model ([Table 3](#)). The predicted probabilities tell us what an individual (given our statistical model) from different countries' probability of "agreeing" or "strongly agreeing" to the five statements, while setting all other variables at their mean. For example, in ([Table 4](#))⁶ we see that Norwegians have the highest probability of agreeing (38%) and strongly

Table 4. Predicted probability of the outcome “agree” and “strongly agree” for individual from different countries.

		Norway	Finland	England	California, US
S1 Neglect	Agree	38% (.011)	34% (.013)	28% (.014)	32% (.013)
	Strongly agree	20% (.012)	14% (.011)	9% (.008)	12% (.010)
S2 Service	Agree	43% (.013)	44% (.014)	46% (.014)	47% (.013)
	Strongly agree	45% (.017)	45% (.021)	40% (.211)	39% (.019)
S3 Care order	Agree	23% (.010)	19% (.011)	26% (.011)	21% (.011)
	Strongly agree	14% (.009)	10% (.008)	18% (.013)	12% (.009)
S4 Well being	Agree	53% (.010)	53% (.010)	51% (.012)	53% (.010)
	Strongly agree	24% (.013)	23% (.015)	33% (.019)	28% (.017)
S5 Work	Agree	41% (.011)	44% (.011)	45% (.011)	43% (.011)
	Strongly agree	15% (.010)	20% (.014)	21% (.015)	18% (.013)

Note: Predicted probabilities are based on the ordered logistic regression models from Table 3, focusing on outcome value 4 and 5 on the dependent variables (for predicted probabilities for all values, see Table 4.0A in Appendix). All other variables are held at their mean value. Standard errors in parentheses.

agreeing (20%), followed by Finns and Americans. While Englishmen are least likely to agree (28%) or strongly agree (9%) that this is a case of neglect. It's a high probability that individuals from all four countries agree that services should be provided. Norwegians (45%) and Finns (45%) are most likely to agree strongly, while Englishmen (45%) and Californians (39%) are most likely to agree. Englishmen are more likely to agree (26%) and strongly agree (18%) that a care order should occur. Here Norwegians (23% and 14%) and Californians (21% and 12%) have a somewhat similar probability, and Finns (19% and 10%) has the lowest probability to agree that a care order should happen. When it comes to the questions about future prospects, an ‘average person’ from each country has somewhat similar probability of agreeing and strongly agreeing that children who experience neglect can hamper well-being in adult life. Englishmen (33%) and Californians (28%) has the highest probability of strongly agreeing, followed by Norwegians (24%) and Finns (23%). When it comes to future work, Englishmen (21%) and Finns (20%) have the highest probability to strongly agree that neglect may hamper work prospects, followed by Californians (18%) and Norwegians (15%).

Discussion

The analyses show that a clear majority of citizens state that the authorities should provide services to Jon and Mira's family, and that without help the positive outcome for the children as functional and working adults will be less likely. The different populations of Norway, Finland, England and California vary in their views on the described situation and if it characterizes a neglect situation. They also differ on their perspective of the state's intrusive intervention as a care order. The findings also display a positive correlation between concern for neglect and considering a care order and a further concern for the outcome for the children. These findings resonate with some

of our existing knowledge, as neglect is a form of child maltreatment that has only recently become a priority on the child protection agenda in some countries (Berrick et al., 2019). One characteristic for neglect is that it is difficult to determine when it is a concern, but not a reason for intervention, and when it is so problematic that an intervention is necessary (see e.g., Dickens, 2007). Therefore, it is not a surprise that citizens are divided on this subject similarly to their opinion of intrusive interventions. In general, empirical studies show that citizens accept mild interventions aimed at changing destructive behavior (Diepeveen et al., 2013), which probably explains the large majority of respondents that support service provision to the family. It may also explain our finding that people are divided in terms of the state's intrusive interventions. However, there were differences between countries, which brought us to the overall questions that we address in this paper. First, does institutional context explain populations' perspectives on child protection themes? And second, how do demographic background variables stand out?

Starting with the institutional context, the results show that overall, our hypotheses were confirmed. We expected the populations in Norway and Finland, compared with those in England and California, to have a lower threshold for agreeing that something is neglectful, have higher expectations for the state's responsibilities, and have a higher degree of concern for the future of the children if the state does not intervene. Country differences are evident in the *t*-test results, the regression analysis, and predicted probability tests for these five child protection-related themes. However, there are differences and contradictions that must be discussed. Our expectation was that Norway and Finland, which represent a child-rights protection system, would be similar in their assessments. However, the Norwegian and Finnish respondents departed on important dimensions, such as neglect and intrusive interventions, indicating that the institutional contexts of their child protection systems do not come through in the same way, even though there is a higher number of children placed out of home in Finland than in Norway (Berrick et al., *in press-a*). One systematic difference that may shed light on why Finland and Norway differ on considering a care order, but still emphasize the importance of institutional context, is that the Finnish system is strongly anchored in voluntary interventions and therefore have relatively few involuntary care orders (Pösö & Huhtanen, 2017). In contrast, the Norwegian system is built on due process and rule of law, and treats all serious cases as involuntary cases by default to secure the rights and rule of law for all involved parties (Skivenes & Søvig, 2017). The high rate of the Californian population suggesting the provision of services is not in line with the jurisdiction's institutional context, whereas in terms of intrusive interventions, both the Finnish (as mentioned above) and the high portion of the English population agree to the provision of services, are somewhat different than the context

variable predicts. We do not have a good explanation for the situation of the English respondents. When it comes to the predictions about future outcome for the children if the state does not do anything, it is striking that a large majority assume a bleak future and there is little variation between the populations in the four countries. For respondents from England and California, we might have expected a neutral position on their view about the future for the children, but it is possible that the perceived negative prospects are related to other types of beliefs about decisive factors for human development. We see similarities to findings in a survey of American citizens ($n = 503$) from Lane County, Oregon, who were asked about child safety, abuse prevention perceptions, and readiness for personal action (Todahl, Barkhurst, Watford, & Gau, 2020). The results show that “an overwhelming majority of respondents believed the safety of children is a core responsibility of adulthood, and a strong majority agreed that every person, group and organization have a role in ensuring child safety” (Todahl et al., 2020, p. 7).

In terms of demographic variables, we expected that women, younger persons, politically left-oriented individuals, and persons with higher education to agree to a higher degree that something is neglectful, to be more positive to child protection interventions, and be more concerned about the consequences for the children if there is no state intervention. The most consistent result from the analysis is that higher educated respondents tend to agree more on all five statement variables. This finding is consistent with other results within the welfare state research literature (Svallfors, 2012). We see that this group of citizens also have a higher degree of trust in the child protection system (Juhász & Skivenes, 2017; Skivenes & Benbenisthy, in press), and, are also less supportive of the “blood line” argument (Helland et al., 2020). The reasoning for why higher education is an important feature is in the literature typically related to the socializing effect that education has on democratic as well as egalitarian values (see Robinson & Bell, 1978, cited in Andreß & Heien, 2001) and increased support of equality, social rights, and the welfare state (Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989, cited in Gelissen, 2000, p. 289). Admittedly speculating, we may wonder if the finding that higher educated respondents differ on these five statements compared to low income respondents, are reflecting a sentiment of how low-income citizens are perceived, and a view that neglect would occur to a lesser degree in higher income rungs.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. The data are from 2014 and thus may be outdated. Few empirical studies are available to provide a foundation for the independent variables, and we tested only a few but diverse elements of child protection issues. Thus, the study is explorative, and we can only point at possible correlations in the material. We used weighted panel data; therefore,

the representativeness of samples might be questioned, especially in terms of lacking respondents scoring low on socio-demographic variables, although we do not have reason to believe there are any major concerns with the data material. With our data, we can only include one indicator of socio-economic status, education, which limits our understanding of how socio-economic status influences attitudes toward child protection intervention. While undertaking a parallel line assumption for our ordered logistic regression models (Table 3), we find that statements 2 and 3 meet this criterion, while the other statements (1, 4 and 5) do not meet the criterion. Therefore, the results will have weaknesses.

Concluding remarks

Although, there are study limitations, this study highlights that the citizens' perspectives and attitudes are important for understanding the norms and values underpinning government institutions in societies. In a review of the literature on strategies for involving citizens in public child protection, Collins-Camargo and colleagues (2009) show that community members are increasingly used to improve programs, including Foster Care Review Boards, Court Appointed Special Advocates, and Citizen Review Panels. They suggest that this involvement may promote an involvement that also increase an understanding of the systems functioning. Although it is not meaningful to expect full alignment within a population in pluralistic societies in terms of the thresholds for their concern for children's living conditions and well-being, or when and how the state should intervene, it is of importance that within a democratic society there is some alignment over time between what most people believe is just and fair and what the government does in law and practice. Governments' child protection responsibilities are in essence about societal norms and values that we inevitably are embedded in as members of a community. Living in USA or Norway, provides two very different collective views on family life, state responsibility and children's position in a society (see Berrick, Skivenes, & Roscoe, 2022). We believe especially the latter is of importance when discussion child protection and restrictions of parental rights.

Notes

1. The USA has not ratified the UNCRC, but subscribes to its principles.
2. The second section is as follows:
 2. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.

3. For further elaborations on the law, policy framework, and removal rates see Berrick, Peckover, Pösö, Skivenes (2015), Berrick et al. (2020) and Pösö, Skivenes and Thoburn (2021).
4. In the CA survey, the wording “consider preparations for child removal.” was used.
5. We ran our statistical models (presented in Table 3) with the income variable, which did not have any major impact on the results. Excluding the income variable in our models did make the effect size for education increase for models 1, 2, and 4.
6. In Table 4 we only focus on attitudes in favor of neglect, accepting state intervention and hamper future prospects. Full table with predicted probability for all categories on the dependent variables is presented in Table 4.0A in the appendix.

Predicted probability of the outcome “agree” and “strongly agree” for individual from different countries.

Norway

Finland

England

California, US

S1 Neglect

Agree

38% (.011)

34% (.013)

28% (.014)

32% (.013)

Strongly agree

20% (.012)

14% (.011)

9% (.008)

12% (.010)

S2 Service

Agree

43% (.013)

44% (.014)

46% (.014)

47% (.013)

Strongly agree

45% (.017)

45% (.021)

40% (.211)

39% (.019)

S3 Care order

Agree

23% (.010)

19% (.011)

26% (.011)

21% (.011)

Strongly agree

14% (.009)

10% (.008)

18% (.013)

12% (.009)

S4 Well being

Agree
 53% (.010)
 53% (.010)
 51% (.012)
 53% (.010)
 Strongly agree
 24% (.013)
 23% (.015)
 33% (.019)
 28% (.017)
 S5 Work
 Agree
 41% (.011)
 44% (.011)
 45% (.011)
 43% (.011)
 Strongly agree
 15% (.010)
 20% (.014)
 21% (.015)
 18% (.013)

Note: Predicted probabilities are based on the ordered logistic regression models from Table 3, focusing on outcome value 4 and 5 on the dependent variables (for predicted probabilities for all values, see Table 4.0A in Appendix). All other variables are held at their mean value. Standard errors in parentheses.

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