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Cooperation and confidentiality. Information sharing between the Swedish social service and the police in juvenile crime prevention

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ABSTRACT

In Sweden, social workers in social services have the discretion to decide whether or not to disclose information to the police in work with juvenile crime prevention. Thereby, they face a conflict between the obligation to keep client information confidential and the obligation to cooperate with the police. This article examined descriptions of information sharing, in policy documents and interviews with social services management, social workers and police officers in a medium-sized municipality. Thematic content analysis, through the lens of neo-institutionalism, was used. The results showed that cooperation with the police, social workers' scope of discretion and clients' trust all were seen as important. However, the concept of cooperation was described as vague, and client confidentiality was seen as the most important objective. The conclusions of this study indicate that social workers can be assumed to oppose using discretion in ways not congruent with the clients' care needs.

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Confidentiality; juvenile crime prevention; secrecy; social services; The Swedish Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act

Introduction

Authorities are often specialised, while social problems seldom are clearly delimited and cooperation between many different authorities is needed. Thus, social workers sometimes face a conflict between keeping client information confidential and other demands, such as the duty or the option to report crimes or risks of harm. Information sharing with the police entails a trade-off between crime prevention and ethical as well as therapeutic ambitions to maintain a client's trust. In Sweden, social workers often have the discretion to decide whether or not to disclose information to the police (Bäckman, 2021).

In the Swedish political field it has been argued that every public authority must take part in the battle against juvenile crime and that the social services' incentive to share crime preventive information should be extensive (Government Bill 2024/25:65). Thus, Swedish social workers' dilemma of choosing between cooperation and confidentiality is a well-established problem of relevance to the practical field of social work, that has received little attention in social work research. Through thematic content analysis, using

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neo-institutionalism as a theoretical lens, this article therefore aimed to examine descriptions in documents and interviews of information sharing between the social services and the police in work with juvenile crime prevention in a Swedish municipality.

The research field and the questions of the study

The use of terms such as collaboration and cooperation are complex and inconsistent, but put simply, often cooperation is described as working with others to achieve goals of your own, whereas collaboration refers to working with others to achieve shared goals (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020). Social workers have many objectives, such as protecting vulnerable individuals and promoting social justice as well as societal development. Thus, it can be argued that the police and the social workers sometimes are, and must be, collaborating in juvenile crime prevention. However, the core mission of the police can be described as preventing and investigating crime based on criminal law, while the social services activities primarily are tied to therapeutical preventive ambitions (Linhorst et al., 2022). Since the police and social services have different societal functions and in Sweden do not communicate freely, the term cooperation is used in this article to describe their shared activities.

The ethical principles of the International Federation of Social Work state in article 6.2 that social workers are to respect and work in accordance with client's rights to confidentiality and privacy unless there is risk of harm to self or others, or there are other statutory restrictions (IFSW International Federation of Social workers [IFSW], 2018). While secrecy means that information is concealed because of legal restrictions, confidentiality refers to the conditions under which information is held. Internationally, social workers' balancing between maintaining confidentiality and cooperation with the police is a well-established dilemma (Christian, 2020; Garrington et al., 2024; Hobson et al., 2021; Linhorst et al., 2022; Patterson & Swan, 2019; Segal, 2023). Due to the child welfare ambitions of social work, this dilemma tends to be emphasised in the work on juvenile crime prevention (Sabbe, 2020).

In Finland, Norway and Denmark as well as in Sweden, the social service and other authorities have secrecy towards each other, but can sometimes communicate for crime preventive purposes through secrecy-breaching provisions (Haugstvedt & Tuastad, 2021; Heinonen, 2014; Müller et al., 2022; Pedersen & Stothard, 2015). The Swedish social workers ethical guidelines state that information on clients must be handled carefully and according to the secrecy demanded by the law (SSR, 2017). Tacitly, clients in Sweden normally should be informed about the legal limitations of secrecy, but there are neither clear ethical or binding national regulations on the issue. Also, clients are assumed to be encouraged, but cannot be required, to sign secrecy waiver consent when social workers find grounds for cooperation with other authorities (SSR, 2017).

Even though information sharing between social workers and the police is a much-debated topic (Government Bill 2024/25:65; SOU 2024:63), Swedish studies addressing this issue are rare. A few legal studies on the disclosure of information between social workers and the police have been conducted (Bäckman, 2021; Hjertstedt et al., 2020). Also, studies on the SSPF model for preventive interprofessional cooperation between schools, social services, police and youth clubs (SSPF – Skola, Socialtjänst, Polis and Fritids) conclude that the ability to manage secrecy is crucial (Söderberg, 2016, 2023).

Except for a report from The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ - The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention [BRÅ], 2021), there are no empirical studies of descriptions of Swedish social workers' practical information sharing with the police in the field of juvenile crime prevention. This article therefore explored how this information sharing was described in policy documents and interviews in a medium-sized Swedish municipality. The following research questions were formulated:

(1) How were the conditions for information sharing concerning juvenile crime prevention described in policy documents and by social services management, social workers and the police?
(2) What ambitions as well as pros and cons of the information sharing emerged in the materials?

The context of the Swedish legal premises of the study

Chapter 26 of the Swedish Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act (Offentlighets- och sekretesslagen. The Swedish Code of Statutes 2009:400, hereafter OSL) states that the main principle is for all client information to be protected by strong secrecy. However, Chapters 10 and 12 of the OSL regulate secrecy-breaching provisions, of which the most relevant in social work are consent and different child protection purposes. Breach of secrecy without legal grounds is a crime under the Swedish criminal code.

Mandatory reporting requires authorities such as the Swedish police to provide social services with information if a child may be risking harm, for example through their own behaviour. The social workers, on the other hand, are through a secrecy-breaching provisions (Chapter 10, Section 18a OSL) able, but not obliged, to pass on information to the police when children exhibit norm-violating behaviour. This provision also states that social workers must assess whether it's appropriate for information to be disclosed to the police in view of social interventions, or for other reasons. Thus, the social services should not provide the police with information, if the trust necessary to successfully implement social interventions might be damaged.

The asymmetry in information handling between the police and the social service creates tensions in the SSPF model. The national guidelines on SSPF state that the youth and guardian must consent to information sharing but also that confidential information could be disclosed on other 'legal ground for breaches of secrecy', i.e. normally secrecy-breaching for child protection (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2022, p. 9). The above-mentioned report from BRÅ highlighted that social workers have to either evaluate the grounds for sharing information with the police on a case-by-case basis, which was perceived as cumbersome, or share information in a grey area of unlawful handling of secrecy and possible loss of the client's confidentiality (BRÅ, 2021). The report also stated that many social workers 'said they did not want to risk losing the trust of their clients. However, others argue that the clients presuppose that information is shared between public authorities and that the concern about loss of trust should not be over-estimated' (BRÅ, 2021, p. 11).

The original designation of OSL on secrecy-breaching for juvenile crime prevention purposes was that the risk of criminal activity that could be prevented should be assessed. In 2025, this provision was changed to concern an assessment of whether there are

'concrete circumstances' carrying risks of criminal activity (Government Bill 2024/25:65, p. 138). There was no clarifying of the specific meaning of 'concrete circumstances', but according to the government, this 'simplification of terms' may 'lead to an increase in information sharing' (ibid). Also, there is a proposal that the legislation will be further amended so most public authorities, including the social service, will be able to disclose information to each other when information is needed to prevent crime (SOU 2024:63).

Theoretical points of departure

Initially, we had planned to use a theory of legal sociology. After noticing that the main arguments in the materials concerned organisational structures, we instead choose to examine the materials through the lens of neo-institutional theory. Neo-institutional theory assumes that employees within an organisation are trained in how activities are carried out and in the particular values that form the basis of the activities (Johansson, 2009). Accordingly, within this perspective the organisation of public authorities is seen as governed by different structures, such as mandatory regulatory structures, normative structures through explicit values, and cognitive structures in the form of patterns of thought (Scott, 2013).

A workplace culture can be described as consisting of hegemonic processes and behavioural patterns, established through struggles between different structures for interpretive priority. In time, new structures may emerge, creating conflicts, which can result in the continuation or replacement of the previous hegemony (Johansson, 2009). If the current structures have high outward legitimacy but are at the same time often ignored, aims and activities no longer are linked and so-called decoupling occurs (Brunsson, 2006). The differences between the institution's official image and its organisation in practice often alienate the employees (Madestam, 2017).

Both legislation and the formal governance of the management affect the activities of the social services. The regulative structures are therefore outwardly visible. At the same time, social workers often have flexible discretion in assessments and positions taken in individual cases which means that the core activities of social workers are not easily scrutinised (Svensson & Ponnert, 2022). Neo-institutional theory has a wide variety of content. Thus, we adopted parts of it, and used an analytical perspective based on differences and similarities between 1) regulative structures in the form of mandatory requirements, 2) normative value structures in the form of stated values, and 3) cognitive structures in the form of patterns of thought.

Materials and method

Sample

The study was ethically approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Board (Dnr. 2021-03203) and the materials of the study were collected in October and November of 2022 in a medium-sized Swedish municipality. This municipally was singled out since in 2021, one of the social service units was refocused to work with juvenile crime, partly in cooperation with the police. Therefore, the challenges of information sharing were assumed to be apparent in both the social services' field work and in the policy

documents recording the municipality's political processes connected to the reform of 2021. Particularly, the political ambitions were assumed to emerge in the policy documents, whilst interviews were assumed to illuminate ambitions as well as pros and cons.

Data collection

For us to understand the refocused work on juvenile criminality, we had a communication with the management of the social services before starting the study. Also, all policy documents from the years 2020–2022 related to the reform of social services' work with juvenile crime of 2021 were collected. Nine municipal policy documents were found relevant for the study. These were missives with directives from the Social Welfare Board to the social services management and missives from the management to the board.

Invitations to participate in the study, including a description of the project, information about consent and an interview guide, were sent through mailing lists provided by the municipality. Those who were interested in participating were asked to contact the researchers. Presumably due to our earlier contact, the management took an interest in participating. By contrast, social workers and police officers turned out to be hard to access as respondents, despite repeated attempts of recruiting. Fourteen interviews with seven persons from social services management, four social workers at the juvenile crime unit and three police officers working with juvenile crime were performed.

A semi-structured interview guide was designed by the researchers together, using discussion themes and supportive questions. The discussion themes were derived mainly from a synoptically reading of the policy documents. The respondents were asked about their opinion on the pros and cons of cooperation, and on how confidentiality and secrecy issues worked. Katarina Alexius was responsible for the interviews with the social workers and the police, while Siv-Britt Björktomta and Maritha Jacobsson carried out interviews with the social services management

Most interviews took place in a location chosen by the respondent. One interview, with a police officer, was conducted over the phone. Also, due to their working hours, three persons from social services management requested to be interviewed as a focus group and two other persons from social services management through Zoom. Since these arrangements were deemed unlikely to affect the results except on the margin, the demands were respected.

Analysis

The aim was to operationalise a thematic content analysis by clarifying themes in the materials through a dialectical interaction between the manifest contextual content and the theoretical framework. Together, we systematically reviewed expressions and arguments as well as descriptions of pros and cons on information sharing in transcriptions of the interviews and in the nine relevant policy documents. We also studied whether and, if so, in what way conflicts occurred in the descriptions. Thus, the transcriptions of the interviews as well as the policy documents were read and reread in order to sift out contextual themes, i.e. patterns in the text descriptions (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The themes were coded and

compared to each other, and their content were related to neo-institutionalism. After discussing different suggestions, we concluded that the following three themes emerged in the materials:

(1) Cooperation as an ideal but vague component in the crime prevention.
(2) Social workers' scope of discretion.
(3) Social work as a trust-based activity.

Following the construction of these themes, examples as illustrative as possible were chosen as quotes. The selection procedure was not without difficulties, since most texts could be seen as part of many themes at the same time. Katarina Alexius wrote the initial draft of the manuscript, but all three authors discussed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Limitations

Policy documents contain a text-level and might not show the actual political activities. Also, there was a risk that respondents whom were aware of the political processes would answer in keeping with the policy documents. Furthermore, if the study had included a wider range of the 290 municipalities of Sweden, the materials would have been more varied and the generalisability would have been strengthened. Since clients cannot be assumed to have knowledge of the content of OSL, we deemed that children and youth as respondents would be relevant primarily if the study had concerned issues of trust, or lack thereof, in the social service. But, including many categories of professionals was assumed to assure the elucidation of various angles of the challenges of information sharing. Since the study was designed to interpret the materials, the results were based on pragmatic validity and analytical generalisation (Patton et al., 2017); that is, we assumed that the conclusions concerning this municipality could offer guidance in situations similar to those studied through generalisations at the analytical level. However, by in-depth examining both policy documents and interviews with professionals in this specific municipality, we hoped to shed light on an immersed multitude of aspects of information sharing.

Results

Cooperation as an ideal but vague component in crime prevention

The choice of neo-institutional theory as analytical lens meant that several types of institutional structures came to light within the materials. On a regulative level (Scott, 2013), the results showed that in line with the legal premises the policy documents highlighted that social workers should both maintain the trust of their clients and cooperate with the police, sometimes through information sharing without clients' consent. Thus, the policy documents explicitly and repeatedly focused on the need for:

> / . . . /a close cooperation with civil society, public authorities and other organisations (SCN-2020–00117, Social Welfare Board Missive, 17 September 2020, Appendix 1, p. 1)

The social workers stated that clients were encouraged to sign secrecy waiver forms to facilitate cooperation between authorities. Also, they meant it was a self-evident routine to inform clients about the legal limitations of secrecy, though this sometimes was missed out due to a high workload. All respondents expressed positive views on the municipality's ambitions on cooperation, even though the concept of cooperation was perceived as a somewhat vague normative value objective. Additionally, the respondents enounced that the administrative establishments within both the social services and the police were complex, leading to staff from different parts of the same organisation sometimes not knowing about each other's work with the same youth. The conditions for cooperation were described as sometimes complicated:

> The cooperation is good, but fragile. That's how it has been. The police have been slightly ahead of us in getting started and thinking in these terms, and then we made a quick turnaround [by prioritising cooperation]. So there has always been a gap. (Respondent B, manager in the social administration)

Things described by the social workers as sometimes problematic in the information handling were that school management set mandatory reporting aside in order to protect the school's reputation, and that public authority staff remained passive due to fear of youths' criminal relatives. Furthermore, consent to information sharing in areas such as SSPF was sometimes denied by clients, making the preventive work complex.

> / . . . /there are very difficult families. The ones that refuse everything./ . . . /If the objective here is to prevent recruitment into criminal gangs, to reduce crime in deprived city areas, to reduce insecurity in society, to get young people to make the right choices: is maintaining secrecy in the social services, is that what's the key? (Respondent G, social secretary)

Both social workers and police officers said that they had gained a better understanding of each other's work tasks through the cooperation. Thereby they were now able to provide more support for each other, which had led to a clear improvement in the quality of the police's mandatory reports, among other things.

> So, I don't just take a quick snapshot, but I do [pause], I summarise when I write mandatory reports. And I know that the social services appreciate this a lot because these [summaries] are so straightforward and clear, and give the social services a better picture of the situation. But it's also because I have more experience of talking to the social services, so I've started to understand what they need (Respondent K, police officer).

The clearest effect of the cooperation initiated by the 2021 reform was described by all respondents in terms of social workers and the police getting to know each other better and therefore more easily getting to know who to contact in different situations. Thus, they expressed being able to act more quickly and effectively. This can be interpreted as an establishment of cognitive as well as normative value structures of cooperation as an ideal but in practical implementation indistinct component in the juvenile crime prevention.

Social workers' scope of discretion

The materials showed that conflicting structures sometimes emerged in the social workers' handling of the trade-off between cooperation with the police and ethical as well as

therapeutic ambitions. The municipality's missives stated that the work within SSPF should be strengthened and that social workers should participate in the work of the police in order to be able to quickly assist the police when the need arose. Also, it was stated that the social services should:

> / . . . /ensure that all secrecy breaching legal provisions are applied, so that available information is used and shared between different activities and actors. This applies both internally and in relation to, for example, the police. (SCN-2020–00117, Social Welfare Board Missive, 17 September 2020, Appendix 1, p. 4.)

There were no descriptions in the policy documents on how the cooperation was supposed to be carried out when conflict between different interests occurred, but all our respondents expressed that both the social workers and the police officers understood each other's conditions for handling information. Most respondents described that maintaining the clients' trust and the complexity of confidentiality in social work entailed challenges:

> the legislation would need to be changed/ . . . /Do I think we will ever fully resolve this issue? No, not even with amended legislation, because there will always be different opinions and ambitions over the different approaches we take in order to deal with this issue. (Respondent E, manager in the social administration)

Despite the opportunities for discretion in the legal, i.e. regulative structures, the social workers as well as police officers claimed that there were clearly restrictive unwritten key directives for information sharing within the social services. The social workers' understanding was that even though there was a scope of discretion, they were obliged to follow these restrictive directives in order to achieve uniformity within the municipality:

> Before [the key directives], we have of course had an open exchange of information with the youth shelter/ . . . /but now we've been forced to change that. They've [through unwritten directives] added a wall of secrecy, so now we're no longer allowed to have the open dialogue we used to have. (Respondent H, social worker)

These unwritten directives were not formally mandatory requirements and should therefore, we believed, not be seen as regulative but normative value structures. The interpretive priority of this restrictiveness was questioned in particular by the police officers, who, in line with the BRÅ report (2021), expressed dissatisfaction with the state of affairs. They described that the social workers had no scope for discretion due to organisational directives that governed secrecy at an unnecessarily restrictive level:

> Perhaps as a lawyer at the municipality you shouldn't tell everyone working in a department not to share any information. Instead, you should perhaps make sure you educate, and that they understand that they themselves have to decide when and whether they may share or not./ . . . /it's more like a very restrictive 'no, don't share any information' (Respondent L, police officer).

Since the tangible meaning of cooperation was not as clear to the social workers as the protection of client's rights to confidentiality, the scope of discretion in the legal regulative structures seemed to be overshadowed by the normative value structures of unwritten key directives to focus on secrecy. Thereby, a tacit clash emerged between structures prioritising crime prevention through cooperation and structures prioritising therapeutic ambitions.

Social work as a trust-based activity

Even though ambitions to improve cooperation were clearly stated in the policy documents, it was also emphasised that secrecy was important in social work and training sessions on secrecy were implemented for all employees (SCN-2020–00117, Social Welfare Board Missive, 7 December 2020, p. 4). According to all the respondents, social work was through unwritten key directives established and through uniform institutional activities upheld in the normative value structures as trust-based (Johansson, 2009). All respondents consistently referred to consent as the basis for social workers to disclose information to the police. The meetings within SSPF were described by all the respondents as being based on either consent, exchange of unspecified information, or the disclosure of specified information from others to the social services on the basis of mandatory reporting. If consent was not given, mutual exchange of information could, to some degree, take place without consent only if a child welfare investigation had been opened:

> If I have an open [child welfare] investigation, I can of course bring in professional contacts, that's okay. But if I don't have that option, if I have some type of report, but I don't yet know how to go on about it, then we're limited. And sometimes that puts a spanner in the works, because I sometimes know, let's say, that someone at the youth shelter knows who this kid is, but I can't ask questions directly. And there's actually almost no way around that, I feel, because then you end up in a [legal] grey area and you don't want to risk breaching professional secrecy (Respondent F, social worker).

It was repeatedly emphasised that information was only disclosed to the police when it was legally correct. This caution was described as being based on the desire to respect the clients' trust as well as to not do anything illegal. Also, in line with well-established knowledge, novice social workers were described as often following organisational regulations and key directives closely out of fear of making mistakes (Börjesson & Ulmestig, 2024; Tham & Lynch, 2021).

> We have a lot of young employees in the social services who have just graduated and are afraid of being reported to the Ombudsman, afraid of doing something wrong/ . . . /I think there is a bug in the system. We should be able to talk to each other. But I think that we are very protective of the individual's privacy. (Respondent D, manager in the social administration)

At the same time, in line with the BRÅ-report (2021), the social workers claimed that some of the clients assumed that public authorities communicated freely, and therefore usually withheld information important to the police from the social services. In addition, the clients were described as being well aware that the exercise of public authority by the social services could include compulsory care, i.e. a deprivation of liberty as with a criminal sanction. Thus, clients already had an incentive to sometimes be careful when talking to social workers. Overall, social service managers as well as social workers emphasised that there were no obstacles in cooperation with the police, as long as the clients' trust weren't jeopardised in a way problematic for the therapeutic aspects of the social work.

> It is clear that the youths have an opinion about the fact that we are to some extent allied with the police. But I think that they still find it easy to tell the difference between what we

> are doing and what the cops are doing./ … /Even when we, as social workers, sit in on interrogations, etc., it's like the police's playing field, and that's something that a youth knows very clearly. (Respondent I, social secretary)

In contrary to what was stated in the BRÅ-report (2021), social workers in our interviews were not perceived to really have a choice between evaluating the grounds for sharing information on a case-by-case basis on the one hand, and sharing information in a legal grey zone on the other. Instead, restrictive interpretations of secrecy appeared hegemonic. Since the legal regulative norms were ambiguous and the normative values of the municipality and its organisation in practice were described as being synchronised with the cognitive structures, no alienating decoupling had emerged (Brunsson, 2006; Madestam, 2017). However, all respondents described ambitions to cooperate based on the objective of streamlining the work against juvenile crime. The occurrence of criticism against the restrictive handling of secrecy could be interpreted as a struggle for a more flexible interpretive priority. Also, the 2025 legal expansions of the possibilities for information sharing could be seen as a part of such an ongoing struggle between structures.

Discussion

As noted in the section Sample above, if the interviews had taken place in a wide range of municipalities, the descriptions would have been more varied and the generalisation of the study would have been stronger. Given the difficulties to recruit social workers and police officers as respondents, it's unfortunately precarious whether or not the study contains thematic saturation. For example, the respondents might have exaggerated the occurrence of restrictive information sharing to ensure that their descriptions would not appear as unlawful breaching of secrecy. Nonetheless, the descriptions of restrictiveness were very uniform and the respondents did not answer in keeping with the policy documents, suggesting that the respondents were being factual.

In summary, the study showed that though cooperation was described positively, the core mission of social services was perceived as therapeutic handling of their clients' social needs and not to protect society from crimes. Also, the results indicate that Swedish social workers' main competence are in areas related to social care assessments and not in the field of estimating risks of criminal activity. Thus, the results could be seen as illustrations of the divergences between structures derived from the police core mission to prevent crimes and those derived from the therapeutic idea of social work as a trust-based activity.

In our view, these divergences should not be disregarded. For example, even if it is in the best interest of a child not to commit crimes, in the case of young adolescents in particular, needs assessments often favour care in a familiar home environment or in a family home. In Sweden, care measures that include physical constraints on children and youths without consent can be used only in institutions for compulsory care. Therefore, the social care practiced in a parental home or a family home sometimes will be seen as not enough from the police perspective on crime prevention. The Swedish social services have no explicit task to protect public safety, and the social care needs of young clients will in these

situations clash with ambitions of crime control. Cooperation with the police will thus sometimes be incongruent with the therapeutic dimension of the social services.

It can be argued that ethical as well as therapeutical principles of social work are negatively affected if clients' trust is de-prioritised in favour of crime prevention. However, it can also be argued that social workers promoting of social justice and societal development must include ambitions on social responsibility through public safety, which sometimes presuppose crime preventive cooperation between every public authority. Nonetheless, the more the social services are required to cooperate with the police, the more often conflicts of interest will arise between working strategies focusing on the social needs of the clients and ambitions of crime control. Even though this study concerned only one municipality, this in-depth examination suggested that imposing social workers to cooperate based on general anti-crime functions likely will emphasise polarised views on effective juvenile crime prevention strategies. Therefore, social workers and their professional organisations should be more involved in policy changes and legislative initiatives related to the interface between social work and law enforcement.

Implications

The Swedish legislation will eventually by the end of 2025 be amended so that the social service and many other public authorities can disclose information to each other when information is needed to prevent crime (SOU 2024:63). But according to this bill, information should not be disclosed if the interest protected by secrecy takes precedence over the interest in disclosing the information. Hence, when trying to strike a fair balance between the competing interests, the trade-off between cooperation and the clients' trust will remain and require social workers to make complex assessments. As a consequence of the conclusions of this study, we believe that following implications emerge:

- Since Swedish social workers' activities often can be assumed to be based primarily on their workplace's key directives, the authorities that control these must carefully consider how social workers' cooperation with the police should be handled. It's probable that specific training for social workers on balancing confidentiality with social responsibility through crime prevention is required in many municipalities.
- To create legitimacy in the social workers assessments when sharing information with the police, the balancing of advantages and disadvantages in relation to the different risks of harm needs to be expressly clarified and thereby transparent. National advisory protocols, approved by professional organisations, on the balancing of interest should be considered.
- If there are unambiguous political ambitions for the interest of crime prevention to take precedence, it would be pertinent to include public safety as a clear objective in the Swedish Social Service Act (2025). However, politicians with ambitions to transfer general anti-crime functions to social workers should consider that clashes between mandatory regulations, normative values and cognitive structures entail risks of polarising the views on crime prevention strategies, which might have an adverse impact on the cooperation between professions.

Accordingly, it will be a task for future research to study what changes will come through the Swedish social workers' extended possibilities to share information with the police in juvenile crime prevention. For example, quantitative examinations of the trust, or lack thereof, of children and families in the social service in relation to the social workers cooperation with the police would bring relevant information into the debate on balancing of interests.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethics and integrity policies

The study has been performed according to the Swedish ethical regulations and has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Board (Dnr. 2021–03203).

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