



Comments on the Official Norwegian Report (NOU 2020:16) Living Conditions in Cities: Good communities for everyone

NOU 2020:16

Levekår i byer. Gode lokalsamfunn for alle.

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1. Introduction

Urban issues such as poverty or marginality and disadvantage, unrest, crime, housing, segregation and social cohesion are on the political and academic agenda in Europe and in the US (Andersen, 2002; Atkinson, 2019; Galster, 1990; Gerell & Kronkvist, 2017; Mayer, Thörn, & Thörn, 2016; Uslaner, 2012; Wacquant, 2008). As indicated, policymakers devise strategies to address such problems (Andersson, Wimark, & Malmberg, 2020; Damm, Nielsen, Mattana, & Rouland, 2020; Davis, 2019; George & Patrick, 2017; van Gent et al., 2018; van Gent & Musterd, 2013). This also holds true for Norway (e.g. Andersen & Brattbakk, 2020).

In Norway, the Government or a specific ministry may appoint a committee to report on an issue of relevance. The results are published as an Official Norwegian Report – *Norges offentlige utredninger* (NOU) in Norwegian. While it can be argued that urban issues are not a political priority in Norway, the current conservative Government – led by prime minister Erna Solberg – did appoint a committee to examine living conditions in Norwegian cities. The Norwegian Commission for *City and Living Conditions* presented its NOU on 16 December 2020 (NOU 2020:16). The report is important as it summarizes the latest knowledge on the topic and provides recommendations for future Norwegian urban policies. Hence, it is worth a thorough and critical review.

This commentary focuses on a few selected topics and policy recommendations. It reflects on the report's strengths and possible shortcomings given what we know about the status of knowledge on these and related topics. Our first main conclusion is that the report presents a comprehensive and, in large part, up-to-date account of urban (social) challenges in Norway. The second is that the report is important because it takes a comprehensive approach to the field of living conditions – presenting both tendencies and effects, as well as discussing structural variables that cause variations and inequalities in living conditions. One of the main messages in the report is that an important foundation for preventing geographical areas from being exposed to accumulated poor living conditions is to counteract the increase in economic inequality in society and to ensure basic welfare for all. The report argues that these efforts should focus on the main aspects of Norwegian working life and the welfare model. Among the key instruments are tax and employment policies as well as income security, education and health services. In the committee's view, an appropriate employment policy – one that will increase the number of people participating in the workforce – and early intervention for children and young people are most important for contributing to better living conditions in the short and long term.

Even though our main impression is that the report presents an important and impressive overview of national, Nordic and international research in the field, this review will comment upon some of its weaknesses. We intend to highlight three of the subjects discussed – segregation, crime and urban development (including housing) – and to identify some significant omissions of relevant literature as well as looking at some of the key topics. Afterwards, we will question the soundness of some of the policy recommendations.

The NOU highlights the following – partially interrelated – issues: Socio-economic and ethnic segregation, including residential, school and kindergarten segregation; welfare or living conditions, including work, income and wealth accumulation, the price of housing, tenure, voter turnout, health and social inequalities; consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic; residential and neighborhood qualities; growing up in the city, including social control, schooling, leisure activities as well as intoxication and vulnerability; and crime and safety. The NOU and its digital attachments,¹ offer a detailed and comprehensive database for anyone interested in the 'state of affairs' of Norwegian cities, including analyses and nuanced discussion of urban (social) problems (even if the term 'challenges' seems to be preferred by the commission/policymakers). The commission discusses the potential causes and consequences. Due to space limitations and the limits of our own research interests, we first examine two of the main, and in our view, interrelated topics, namely *segregation* and *crime*. In addition, the third topic we review is the chapter on *urban development and housing* as part of the report's section on 'strategies and initiatives'.

2. Segregation and social cohesion

As many readers of this journal are already familiar with the scholarly literature on segregation, we will not present the NOU's own summary of the Norwegian research. Moreover, as the literature (e.g. Ljunggren, 2017; Toft & Ljunggren, 2016; Wessel, 2015, 2017), as well as the manifestations (Aarland & Brattbakk, 2020, p. 6) and challenges of segregation itself (NOU 2020:16, p. 13), are to a large degree associated with the capital (also Andersen & Brattbakk, 2020), the following section will take an Oslo-based approach. There are

1. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2020-16/id2798280/>

also separate or related reasons to be zooming in on Oslo. Politicians, citizens and scholars alike, discuss or voice concern over the social, cultural and/or material effects of immigration. In particular, the associations between the residential concentration of immigrants and (potential) urban unrest, crime, material marginalization and socio-cultural frictions have received considerable attention (e.g. Andersen, 2019; Andersen & Biseth, 2013). Furthermore, Norway's largest city is the most relevant case to consider when discussing segregation and its potential negative effects for the following reasons:² the overlap between the proportion of 'non-Western' residents and challenging living conditions is definitely most evident in Oslo's eastern districts (Aarland, 2020, p. 42); it is only in Oslo that several spatially adjacent neighborhoods are all defined as 'vulnerable' (Aarland & Brattbakk, 2020, p. 4); increasing levels of segregation are first and foremost an Oslo phenomenon (NOU 2020:16, p. 13); and finally, it is only in the capital that patterns of school segregation are clearly visible (NOU 2020:16, p. 56).

Whereas the NOU reminds us of the key findings from both the Oslo-based and international research on residential segregation (NOU 2020:16, pp. 13-21), some patterns are (perhaps) more surprising. For instance, Bjørklund (2017) stressed class or socio-economic differences when analyzing voting patterns and turnout in a segregated Oslo. However, two of the researchers partaking in the commission analyzed voting patterns and found 'a very strong correlation between persons with an immigrant background and voter turnout at the area level' (Aarland & Brattbakk, 2020, p. 55). It is documented that in areas with a high concentration of 'immigrants', people are less likely to vote. In the NOU "Better Integration" (NOU 2011: 14), it was asserted that, 'in order to secure the legitimacy of the democracy, the voters in national and local elections should be a reflection of the changes in the population' (p. 272). In other words, the fact that there are areas in Norwegian cities dominated by 'visible minorities', and where relatively few of these residents partake in elections, may pose a significant challenge to the maintenance of 'a well-functioning democracy' (NOU 2011: 14, p. 272). Indeed, such reflections are also found in this more recent NOU. It is explained here that voter turnout is used as a measure of societal integration and whether or not people trust the system/formal authorities (NOU 2020:16, p. 72). Moreover, if or to what degree people participate in elections is also indicative of so-called 'collective efficacy' (see the section 'Crime and collective efficacy', below): 'That is, the ability people have to form groups in order to achieve a common goal' (NOU 2020:16, p. 72). Further on in the report, collective efficacy is linked to 'social capital' and 'social cohesion' with the commission stating that 'social cohesion is the glue that holds society together' – securing the integration of people into their the local community as well as in the nation state (NOU 2020:16, p. 142). Referring to a Danish report, it is assumed that 'residents who are satisfied with their neighborhood are likely to interact with their neighbors and to use communal areas. In turn, this influences local social cohesion' (NOU 2020:16). Chapter 10 then elaborates on the consequences of residential concentration on social mobility, cohesion and trust. Concerning cohesion and trust, the NOU (p. 142) refers to a Norwegian study that notes that 'a decrease [of social and institutional trust] may pose severe societal and political challenges' (Fladmoe & Steen-Johnsen, 2018, p. 337). Furthermore, the authors discuss a Swedish study (Lundåsen & Wollebæk, 2013) that found 'negative effects of ethnic diversity on trust

2. For some relevant international studies, see Malmberg, Andersson, & Östh (2013), Varady (2005), and Wacquant (2008).

in neighbors' and that cultural differences (e.g. norm systems) might be an explanation (Fladmoe & Steen-Johnsen, 2018, p. 340). The Norwegian study also reports lower levels of community trust in ethnically mixed communities and agrees with Lundåsen and Wollebæk on the potential role of cultural differences (Fladmoe & Steen-Johnsen, 2018, pp. 356, 360). Additionally, the commission explains that social cohesion is often less strong in vulnerable neighborhoods and, as a consequence, neighbors will be less invested in maintaining local order, which can in turn lead to more criminal activity locally (NOU 2020:16, pp. 20-21). This has previously been shown in our studies of Swedish data as well, where neighborhood ethnic heterogeneity is negatively associated with cohesion and collective efficacy (Gerell & Kronkvist, 2017; Gerell, 2017).

It should be stressed here that a comparative study of 8th grade students reports that the levels of trust among Norwegian youths do not seem to be decreasing (Schulz & Ainley, 2018, p. 8). The authors also reported that '[t]he influences of minority status [and] socio-economic background (...) on trust in government were evident in only a few countries and were very small in magnitude' (Schulz & Ainley, 2018, p. 13). Such observations may indicate that Norway, in a relative sense, continues to be a high-trust society.

However, there are strong reasons to assume that 'culture' (e.g. knowledge, values, norms and worldviews) is important in the many different ways humans interact or live in cities (Hannerz, 1980, 1992). Interestingly, the commission seems to pay scant attention to 'culture'. There are several passing references to it in the NOU (e.g. NOU 2020:16, pp. 25, 130, 141-143, 250, 252), a few more lengthy discussions – especially concerning 'social control'/parenting (NOU 2020:16, pp. 83-84, but see the 'retractions' on pp. 102, 105) – as well as some indications as to how and why culture matters in a commissioned report written by a consultancy firm (Proba samfunnsanalyse, 2020). However, given the significant role 'culture' can, and often does, play in multi-ethnic societies/cities (Alexander, 2013; Friberg, 2019, 2021; Sandberg et al., 2018), our view is that the NOU downplays its importance. For instance, when summarizing why cities become segregated, the potential influence of cultural differences between groups is absent (NOU 2020:16, pp. 18, 26), even though the role of cultural 'preferences' is noted in passing (NOU 2020:16, pp. 19, 128-130). Even when discussing 'segregation and social contact' (NOU 2020:16, p. 21), culture is not explicitly referred to. We cannot speculate as to why, but we can say that the omission of qualitatively-oriented Norwegian urban scientific publications on the reference lists of both the NOU and the commissioned report on residents' experiences with vulnerable areas (Proba samfunnsanalyse, 2020) is conspicuous. There is a vast literature illuminating the subject that has been overlooked (some relevant studies could be Alghasi, Eide, & Eriksen, 2012; Andersen, 2019; Andersen & Biseth, 2013; Andersen, Brattbakk, & Dalseide, 2017; Andersen, Røe, & Sæter, 2015; Andersen & Skrede, 2017; Danielsen, 2017; Danielsen & Engebrigtsen, 2014; Eriksen, 2015, 2019; Erstad, 2018; Huse, 2014, 2018; Kadasia et al., 2020). The oversight of this strand of literature might have played a role when the commission discussed the assumed positive effects of 'meeting places' (e.g. NOU 2020:16, p. 24 and chapter 16) and the positive potential of ethnically-diverse neighborhoods more generally. For instance, under the heading 'Stubborn problems in vulnerable areas' we read that in such environments, different groups tend to live separate lives because of a lack of local 'meeting places'.

When people do not meet or interact, it may affect their sense of trust and the social glue of the community. This may, in turn, impact residents' sense of attachment to the place they live. Weak social cohesion may make it difficult to tackle local challenges such as unrest, vandalism and crime, which in turn influences whether or not residents feel safe

NOU 2020:16, p. 275.

So,

the commission believes that local communities that are vibrant and good ['levende og gode'], with several meeting places and areas where people can congregate and interact, and [that are characterized by] intergroup relations, can have positive effects on trust and sense of attachment – both in the local neighborhood and wider society in the long term

NOU 2020:16, p. 278.

Consequently, 'the commission recommends that a national assistance program, financed by the State, should be implemented in order to subsidize the establishment of local community arenas or buildings in vulnerable areas that lack such meeting places' (NOU 2020:16, p. 255).

While diversity is both an empirical fact and something policymakers (seem to) value, there is a vast scholarly literature that demonstrates or at least indicates the many complications of creating cohesion or community through mixing strategies (e.g. Andersen, 2014; Andersen & Brattbakk, 2020; Andreotti, Le Galès, & Fuentes, 2013; Bosch & Ouwehand, 2019; Boterman, 2013; Hoekstra & Dahlvik, 2018; Kadasia et al., 2020; Schafer, 2017; van Gent et al., 2018; Wessendorf, 2013). So, while survey findings may indicate that people are in favor of diversity – see for instance the reference to the Norwegian 'integration barometer' (NOU 2020:16, p. 130) – it would be interesting to discuss such claims in light of in-depth studies of both more ethnically homogeneous and heterogeneous Oslo neighborhoods because people often say one thing but act or live differently, and also because people change their stated preferences depending on the context, on how the question is formulated, or after having experienced 'diversity' over time (e.g. Andersen, Ander, & Skrede, 2021). To conclude this section, we turn to Le Galès' (2012, p. 30) and ask if a selective reading might be a reason for 'the illusory social engineering' belief inherent in some of the policy recommendations in the NOU. While we do not argue against the value of 'meeting places', we nonetheless want to stress that this is not enough. There is no guarantee that people will use them or that usage will result in the positive effects policymakers seem to take for granted. We conclude this section with a 'provocative' question: Can the problems of segregation be fixed?

3. Crime and collective efficacy

When it comes to the subjects of crime, fear and cohesion, the NOU discusses many relevant themes, but also reflects glaring omissions in Norwegian research and knowledge on some topics. Collective efficacy ("kollektiv handlekraft") – the ability of residents to maintain order and achieve common goals in their neighborhood – is discussed. It is a theory rooted in social disorganization theory, which was spawned in Chicago about a 100 years ago (Shaw, 1929; Shaw & McKay 1942). And yet there does not seem to be much Norwegian research on it. The NOU largely revolves around Danish reports, which do not go into much depth

on the issue. Meanwhile, there is a large body of research on the topic from Sweden – in particular Malmö University, where Marie Torstensson Levander started researching the topic in the 90s and is still active.

Most researchers in the field would agree that collective efficacy is of some importance, at least in relation to violence, but much less is known about how it can be increased and leveraged to achieve positive change (Gerell, Ivert & Mellgren, 2017). It is important that this is discussed in the NOU, and that it highlights that the subject has largely been neglected in Norwegian social science research. This may stimulate more research interest for collective efficacy.

Similarly, the NOU states that the commission was not given access to crime statistics for the neighborhoods of interest (NOU 2020:16, p. 112). Considering that one of us (Gerell) regularly requests – and obtains – geographically detailed data for crime in Sweden, this appears odd. Indeed, all Swedish police officers can access real-time crime data for crimes reported in the neighborhoods designated as vulnerable by the Swedish police. To access the data, you have to request which crime types you are interested in (or select all crime types), which neighborhoods you are interested in, and which time period you want. Access to data is of great importance for any analysis, and it appears to be much harder to obtain in Norway than in Sweden (see Allvin, 2019 for an example). However, this does not prevent the NOU from making several relevant and interesting observations on crime in Norway. For instance, crime is concentrated in the city center, not deprived neighborhoods – a tendency that is also found in Sweden. We believe, however, that without having access to these specific data, the commission is unable to draw more detailed, and specific, conclusions. Based on a number of our studies, there is reason to question these conclusions. Gerell (2018) finds that while it is true that crime is much higher in the city center than in neighborhoods with low collective efficacy, this is due to the greater number of people *visiting* the city center. Adjusting for such effects, the risk of crime is much higher in neighborhoods with low collective efficacy – largely deprived areas (Gerell, 2018). Similarly, for some types of crime, the rate is much higher in deprived neighborhoods, which one may not be able to ascertain without access to detailed data. One example of this is gun violence – which Norway fortunately does not currently have a major problem with. In Sweden, the rate of gun violence is about 500% higher in neighborhoods the police label as vulnerable in comparison to other parts of the city, while the difference for normal assault is just 50% higher (Gerell et al., 2020).

All in all, we consider that the NOU is successful in relating deprived neighborhoods and segregation to relevant theories of crime – and to actual crime in Norway. The problem is not the NOU itself, but the lack of research on such topics in Norway. Even if concerns have been voiced regarding lack of comprehensive studies on this subject in Sweden, the situation seems to be even more dire in Norway.

4. Urban development and housing

As we have presented earlier, the NOU finds that the effects of segregation and the accumulation of poor living conditions found in Oslo have severe consequences for children growing up in these areas. The commission believes that there is reason to assume that schools with significant living condition challenges are not fully compensated for the additional expenses involved in ensuring equal standards of schooling (NOU 2020:16, p. 170). This means that school services do not ensure equal facilities for everyone; children with a tougher upbringing risk having poorer school services.

The commission also presents research that shows how the contemporary housing market in Oslo produces inequalities in living conditions, and that these inequalities have increased

during the last decade (NOU 2020:16, p. x). Inequalities in income and wealth are worsened by the housing market, as local public authorities in Norway are less active in correcting these tendencies than they are in Denmark and Sweden. Combined with a situation with low rent, increased densification around transport hubs with high property prices, and increased centralization in Norway, the price of housing has increased. Presently, the house prices in Oslo cause problems for low-income individuals and families in buying their own home, and also strengthen segregation and the accumulation of poor living conditions. To prevent this development, the commission points at the structural causes and states that a comprehensive approach is necessary; national welfare-policies, together with urban development and housing policy, are of the utmost importance in preventing residential segregation and the development of spatial concentrations of disadvantage (NOU 2020:16, pp. 26-28).

Having taken a clear position by stating that residential desegregation is a goal (understood as social- and income-heterogeneity in geographical areas) for ensuring social sustainable urban development, the report discusses how new and revised measures and mechanisms can 'correct' for these externalities of the local housing market. Many of the measures being proposed by the commission have the potential to affect these structural conditions. We will look at the proposed amendments to the Norwegian Planning and Building Act, which will give municipalities new juridical instruments. They are as follows:

- Authority to require a "disposition form" in a detailed regulation plan, which gives them the power to dictate the ownership models of the building – if the dwellings are to be housing associations, rental housing etc. This will give them an instrument for distributing rental flats across the city, or for requiring housing associations in certain areas (for ensuring housing stability, as these ownership models restricts the opportunity for renting out the flats).
- Authority to use "development agreements" as tools for asking the developers to include social housing, rental housing, 'entry-level' models (rent-to-own) as (a small) part of the contribution they pay as property owners for being allowed to develop a property. Here, the commission states that national authorities should allow the municipalities to ask for such housing models to be offered below market cost.
- Authority to use planning regulations for municipal pre-emptive right to plots in more defined development areas. This might be used to sell the properties with clauses and terms on social housing, rental-housing etc.
- The commission also applauds the statement from the Government that they wish to investigate new private and public models of 'rent-to-own' and the like, and to consider an upscaling of such models. The commission suggests new planning regulations for these models (also including non-commercial rental houses), and that these models can target special groups who are struggling with entering the housing market, such as youngsters, young families, students and the elderly.

One of the commission's main approaches is that the 'ownership' model in Norway, where 3 in 4 people own their own dwelling, is to be strengthened. Because the report shows that the ownership model has become more unevenly distributed due to social background variables, the measures must compensate for these mechanisms. The commission's suggestions, some of which are also being proposed in the evaluation of the Planning and Building Act (Hanssen & Aarsæther, 2018), have the potential to function as 'entrance tickets' for low-income groups wishing to enter the housing market. Thereby, they can take part in the wealth creation of the housing market in Oslo, and this may in turn result in a greater extent

of housing stability and attachment to place (and thus social cohesion). At the same time, the suggested amendments to the law give the municipalities handy instruments to *geographically* distribute different low-income housing models (both social housing, but also private rent-to-own models) across the entire city, and to use them as de-segregation mechanisms. However, given that residential mobility – (see also NOU 2020:16, chapter 9) – contributes to residential segregation, there are no guarantees that the proposed measures will have the intended effect. In fact, several studies from Oslo demonstrate that people from similar socio-economic groups or classes seem to prefer to reside together (Galster & Turner, 2019; Ljunggren & Andersen, 2014; Toft, 2018), while others indicate that ethno-racial preferences also come into play when parents select a neighborhood (Andersen, 2014; Kadasia et al., 2020; Turner & Wessel, 2013; Wessel & Nordvik, 2019). As Galster and Turner (2017) summarize in their own study of Oslo household intra-metropolitan residential mobility, ‘[Our] results imply that policy-generated introduction of low-status households will encourage the exit of high- and, to a lesser degree, middle-status neighbors’ (p. 2155).

Nonetheless, the commission could also have suggested amendments to the law that would have addressed the problem of property owners being allowed to sit on the fence, waiting to develop regulated land. In Germany, there is a time-limit on the approval of plans – something that could easily be introduced in Norway and that would give municipalities a tool to speed up the building of housing projects (for example, in deprived areas).

With our comments on the subject of segregation in mind, we also question the optimistic perspective of the commission on the effects of some of the measures they recommend. One of these is their emphasis on developing more meeting places and recreational areas, which without doubt is very important for residents of small flats in the neighborhoods in question. Meeting places are also vital for activating youngsters and the elderly, and can become areas where social cohesion in the local community is generated. However, due to the structural character of the challenges, there is reason to question the idea that high-quality meeting places and recreational areas will compensate for the social variables responsible for the inequality. Moreover, research from Oslo and Sweden hints at the possibility that ‘meeting places’ or urban spaces more generally can also have unintended effects (Fagerlid et al., 2021; Gerell, 2021). Thus, the presentation of these measures does seem to us to be too optimistic. However, every new meeting place does have the potential to become a positive contribution to a neighborhood, and the commission suggests that new national grants be issued for buildings that can be used as urban meeting places (*nærmiljøhus*).

The commission clearly states that area programs such as “Groruddalssatsingen” may be necessary to adjust for decades of uneven distribution.³ However, the programs will never be able to solve the challenges of education and connection to working life. The commission clearly warns of these programs becoming the norm and suggests that the funding should rather be channeled to the city authorities via the ordinary revenue system (framework grants). This will give the city authority the autonomy to prioritize the funding according to their local policies, which may create an increased focus on services, and less on urban design and infrastructure.

Last, but not least, the commission asks that more attention to be paid to this subject by national authorities and suggests establishing a national unit with responsibility for coor-

3. Groruddalssatsingen is an area-based strategy aimed at so-called vulnerable areas.

dinating national and local instruments. However, they do not propose a national strategy or plan for reducing segregation, which is found in Sweden and Denmark. This seems quite strange to us, as a coordinative unit needs a governing document to guide their tasks. By formulating a national strategy, the national and local instruments would have common, joint goals, and would be likely to target these challenges in a more comprehensive way.

All in all, having considered the sections discussing segregation, crime, urban development and housing, our main impression is that the NOU is a comprehensive, solid and thorough report. And the report is important as it presents recent publications from many research fields – all of which warn about the increasing segregation and accumulation of poor living conditions that can be empirically observed. Even if the tendencies are less strong than in some Swedish and Danish cities, there is good reason for the national and local authorities to listen to these warnings. However, while the report suggests a toolbox of new instruments for the job that lies ahead for Norwegian policymakers, we end this commentary by asking yet another question: Do we really know what truly works?

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