

Detection of social problems among the elderly by local governments

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Summary

The COVID crisis increased the involvement of municipalities in prevention work for the elderly and pointed out the opportunities that should normally be used more widely. In particular, it means making contact with the elderly on the municipality's own initiative.

The audit also showed that there are far more elderly people in risk groups than those who are actually dealt with by the local government (municipality). According to municipalities, performance lags behind their lack of resources. At the same time, the legal definition of prevention is narrower than expectations for prevention work, and municipalities do not have confidence in the extent to which data in state databases can be used in prevention work. The opportunity to reach those in need faster and with less resource costs by analysing the data stays unused.

The most important observations of the National Audit Office:

- The practice during the COVID crisis showed untapped opportunities in prevention work. Based on contacts received from the Rescue Board or elsewhere, several municipalities called the elderly during the crisis to offer them assistance during movement restrictions (bringing food, etc.). However, those who needed other social services or benefits were also identified. Many municipalities will not continue to connect in a time of crisis, finding that there is no need or resources for this.
- The elderly, who have not turned to their municipality for help themselves, receive little attention in prevention work. In a survey by the National Audit Office, 87% of municipalities found that their current activities in noticing the problems of the elderly were not sufficient, and 68% of municipalities considered that they should deal more with those who have not approached their municipality. The representative organisations of the elderly, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Social Insurance Board also consider the activity of municipalities in prevention work to be insufficient.
- Lack of human resources has been the most mentioned circumstance among municipalities, which hinders more active prevention work (38 municipalities).

For your information

The municipalities have made so-called preventive home visits to about 1–2% of the elderly.

The share of people aged 75+ among the elderly is about 48%, and the share of people aged 85+ is about 13%.

In Denmark, the municipality has a legal obligation to offer the elderly aged 80+ the opportunity to have a preventive home visit by a social worker once a year.

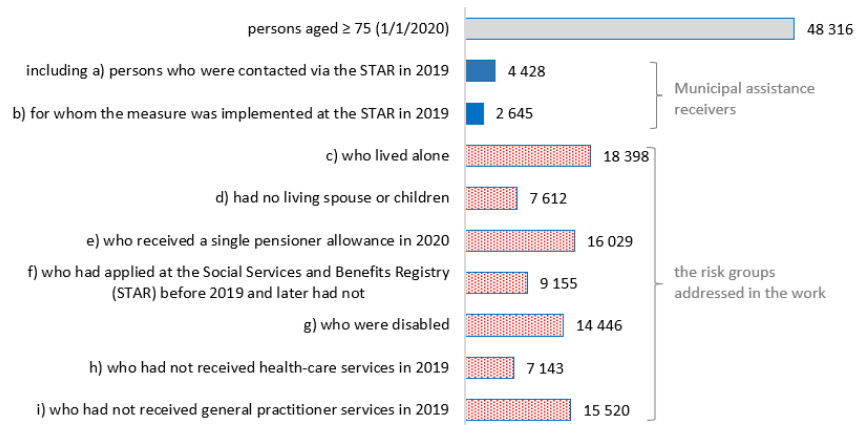
- The meaning of prevention work is broader in the parties' perceptions than is expected of municipalities by law. Prevention is defined by law as a goal of social welfare, not a separate activity. The current responsibilities of a municipality in social work are also based on the initiative of persons in need of help or on hints received about them. According to municipalities and the Ministry of Social Affairs, however, social work must also involve those about whom the municipality has not received information, but who may need help based on certain risks.
- There are far more elderly people at risk than those with whom the municipalities deal directly. In all cases, there are significantly more elderly people living alone, not attending a doctor's office, etc. than those who have turned to their municipality (see Figure 1).

For your information

The National Audit Office analysed the organisation of prevention work towards the elderly in more detail at 5 municipalities: Tallinn, Kohtla-Järve, Valga, Saaremaa, and Viljandi Rural Municipality.

In addition, other municipalities were interviewed. A total of 76 out of 79 municipalities participated in the survey.

Figure 1. The number of elderly people aged 75+, the number of elderly people in certain risk groups, and the number of elderly people who turned to their local governments in these 5 municipalities that were analysed in more detail within the audit



Source: The National Audit Office, based on data from the Population Register, the Social Services and Benefits Registry (STAR), the Social Security Information System, and the Health Information System

For your information

On 1/9/2021, the Ministry of Social Affairs submitted to the coordination group the Social Welfare Act and Other Acts Amendment Act (Bill No. [21-1055/01](#)), which plans to give municipalities the right to make STAR queries in the database to identify persons with disabilities granted who presently are not assisted by their municipalities. The municipality is obliged to make contact with the person within 30 days after receiving the data in order to find out the person's possible need for assistance.

- The municipalities do not have confidence in the extent to which data (including personal data) in databases can be used in prevention work. The Ministry of Social Affairs wants municipalities to be more involved in prevention work, including those who have not turned to them for assistance, and to obtain the necessary data (e. g. contact details of the elderly). In September 2021, an amendment to the law was initiated so that municipalities could use data on people with disabilities for this purpose. At the same time, there are a number of other data in the national databases (see, for example, the previous figure) that indicate a possible need for assistance, and thus there is a need for greater clarity on the possibilities of using data in the context of personal data regulations. Until there is clarity, municipalities will be hesitant to use the data, rather avoid it, and the potential of the data will remain untapped.
- On the positive side, in years 2019–2020, there was a relatively large amount of information for the elderly in newspapers of their rural municipality or city. In addition to the local newsletter (at 75 municipalities), other means of mass communication have also been used, such as displaying information about the possibilities of assistance in day care centres for the elderly, on public information

boards in flat buildings, community centres, etc. Information on the possibilities of assistance was relatively easy to find on the websites of the analysed municipalities.

- It is positive that the Ministry of Social Affairs has emphasised prevention in the state welfare policy and launched various development activities. They help to improve the exchange of information and coordination between the social and health sectors, thus also supporting prevention work for the elderly.

The National Audit Office recommends that the Minister of Social Protection analyse the possibilities of clearly assigning prevention work as a legal task of a municipality. Prevention should also include elderly people who potentially need help, but who have not turned to their municipality for assistance themselves or about whom information has not been provided to the municipality. The Minister, with the involvement of the Data Protection Inspectorate, should also provide the municipalities with explanatory guidelines on the possibilities of using data in state databases in preventive social work, and clarify the nature and level of detail of data collection already available as well as the need for additional legal basis. The National Audit Office also recommends supporting prevention work at municipalities with relevant guidance material, which would bring together best practices and offer solutions to more complex issues.

The Minister of Social Protection has promised to consider a more precise definition of prevention work in law in 2022 during the reorganisation of the long-term care system. In her reply to the draft audit, the Minister also considered it reasonable to update the guidance material on social welfare in the coming years in co-operation with the Data Protection Inspectorate, which would reflect, among other things, the use of personal data in prevention (see her comprehensive answer on page 21 et seq.).

In its reply to the report, **the Social Insurance Board** expressed its readiness to compile guidance material on prevention after the definition of prevention will be specified in law.

