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Belonging and friction

Everyday Life and Integration Among People with an Immigrant
Background in Norway





Belonging and friction: Everyday Life and Integration Among People with an Immigrant Background in Norway

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Over the past fifty to sixty years, immigration has made Norway an increasingly diverse society. While integration policy has traditionally focused on structural and economic aspects, such as employment, education, and qualification, this report directs attention towards the social, subjective, and emotional dimensions of everyday life among people with an immigrant background. These are dimensions that are difficult to capture through public registers, and knowledge about them must be built primarily on the accounts of people who themselves have an immigrant background.

This report is the second in a series of studies based on extensive surveys of the population with an immigrant background, conducted by Fafo on behalf of IMDi. It builds on the first survey round from 2023 (Dalen et al., 2024). One long-term goal is to use these surveys to track developments over time. We examine six thematic areas: (1) identity, belonging, and cross-pressure; (2) perceived discrimination and negative everyday experiences; (3) social participation and contact across groups; (4) trust in people and institutions; (5) attitudes, values, and opinions; and (6) political participation and representation. A central objective is to investigate how distinct the social and symbolic boundaries between different groups in the population are, and how these boundaries vary by length of residence and across generations.

The analyses are based on a nationwide survey conducted in autumn 2025 among people with an immigrant background who had lived in Norway for at least two years, as well as a comparable sample of people without an immigrant background. The survey is among the largest of its kind in Norway.

In the report, we distinguish between three country groups: country group 1 (Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), country group 2 (the relatively new EU member states in Eastern and Central Europe), and country group 3 (Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe outside the EU). We also make a distinction between immigrants and Norwegian-born individuals with immigrant parents, and include a smaller sample of people with one immigrant parent and one parent without an immigrant background.

The results are weighted to correct for response bias. Yet, the survey is based on self-reporting, the response rate is relatively low, and the most marginalised groups are somewhat underrepresented. Absolute levels should therefore be interpreted with caution, whereas comparisons between groups and relationships between variables are more robust.

Differences and similarities between groups

A majority of people with an immigrant background perceive themselves as well integrated into Norwegian society, at nearly the same level as the majority population. The picture is more mixed when it comes to the extent to which people feel accepted for who they are in Norwegian society, where a clearer gap emerges between immigrants and the majority population. Behind the overall picture lie systematic differences between the country groups. Immigrants with a European background score highly on both measures and approach the level of the majority population. It is primarily among

immigrants from country group 3, and even more so among Norwegian-born individuals with immigrant parents from country group 3, that we find a clear discrepancy between feeling integrated and feeling accepted, and between one's own sense of being Norwegian and the experience of being recognised as Norwegian by others. These groups also experience the most pressure, both from wider society and from their own ethnic and religious communities.

Perceived discrimination and negative everyday experiences are far more widespread among immigrants than among the population at large. The prevalence is highest among groups with a visible minority background, and highest of all among Norwegian-born individuals with immigrant parents. The labour market stands out as the arena where discrimination is experienced most frequently, particularly when applying for jobs.

In terms of social participation, a majority of immigrants have regular contact with the majority population at work and in their neighbourhoods, whereas contact is considerably lower in leisure activities and voluntary organisations. Contact is also not symmetrical: far fewer members of the majority population have frequent contact with immigrants than vice versa. Trust in Norwegian institutions is generally high across all groups, with one notable exception: trust in the Child Welfare Services is significantly lower among immigrants than among the rest of the population. Generalised trust in other people varies more and is lower among immigrants from country groups outside Western Europe.

Attitudes and values are an area characterised by both broad agreement and clear divisions. There is widespread agreement across all groups on the equal sharing of housework and caregiving responsibilities, while the largest and most systematic differences concern issues related to sexuality and family life. On more traditional political questions concerning redistribution and the environment, people with an immigrant background differ little from the rest of the population. Finally, there is a clear gap in political participation: electoral participation is lower among people with an immigrant background, and the sense of being politically represented is weaker, particularly among the groups that otherwise face the greatest barriers to participation and belonging.

Ukrainians stand out

Ukrainians are currently one of the largest immigrant groups in Norway and a new group in this survey. They stand out in several respects, partly as a consequence of their short length of residence and refugee background. They report weak belonging to and identification with Norway, which is likely linked to a sense of temporariness, while at the same time reporting relatively little discrimination. In other words, they experience to a limited extent the barriers that characterise immigrant groups with a more visible minority background. At the same time, Ukrainians have weak social networks and relatively little contact with the majority population. In questions of values, they resemble other Eastern European immigrants most closely. Very few have voting rights, and many have limited experience with Norwegian politics, yet they are among the most positive regarding how integration in Norway functions.

Education promotes both integration and frustration

Education is perhaps the most important driver of integration over time and across generations, but it has an ambivalent influence on the subjective experience of belonging. On the one hand, higher education strengthens social participation, trust, and the experience of being integrated, while also shifting attitudes in a more liberal direction. On the other hand, highly educated individuals report more perceived discrimination and a weaker sense of being accepted for who they are. The higher one's formal status, the clearer the discrepancy between one's own integration and recognition from others. Education is therefore associated with both stronger integration and greater frustration, and emerges as a key driver of what we refer to as the integration paradox.

Muslims face somewhat greater social barriers

Muslims differ from other groups in several respects, though not uniformly across all themes. They identify as Norwegian and perceive themselves as integrated to the same extent as other religious groups, and have roughly the same level of trust in Norwegian institutions. At the same time, they are less likely to feel that others regard them as Norwegian, and they feel significantly less accepted. Controlling for other characteristics, Muslims are considerably more likely than members of other religious groups to have experienced discrimination and negative everyday experiences. Religion is also the strongest single predictor of socially and gender-conservative attitudes in the dataset, although the majority of Muslims share the relatively liberal basic values that characterise the majority population on most issues. Muslims also experience more pressure, both from their own ethnic or religious environment and from the wider society.

Norwegian-born individuals with two immigrant parents: caught in the middle

One of the most consistent patterns in the report is that Norwegian-born individuals with two immigrant parents differ from the immigrant generation across a wide range of dimensions. They feel more integrated and are more likely to see themselves as Norwegian, but this is not matched by a corresponding experience of acceptance and recognition. The gap between self-identity and recognition by others is the largest in the entire dataset. Many also experience being looked down upon within their own communities for being "too Norwegian". This group reports more discrimination and more negative everyday experiences than immigrants, particularly in public spaces, in education, and as customers. The group also experiences the highest levels of cross-pressure, both from wider society and from its own ethnic or religious environment. This pattern is consistent with the integration paradox: being born in Norway and having a stronger Norwegian identity does not coincide with increased recognition from the surrounding society. On the contrary, the opposite appears to be the case. Politically, they are the most left-leaning voter group in the dataset and evaluate integration in Norway more critically than immigrants.

People with mixed backgrounds: between minority and majority

Norwegian-born individuals with one immigrant parent from country group 3 are a new group in the study. The group was included to investigate where the boundaries between majority and minority lie and how fixed or fluid these boundaries are. The findings are consistent: they resemble the majority population much more than they

resemble Norwegian-born individuals with two immigrant parents, across almost all dimensions. Virtually all regard themselves as Norwegian, and there is hardly any gap between self-image and recognition from others. They experience relatively little discrimination, although this varies somewhat by their parents' region of origin, and they report low levels of pressure, both from wider society and from their own ethnic or religious environment. In terms of values, they are very close to the majority population. The sample is small and selective, so the findings should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, the fact that their experiences are generally characterised by acceptance and inclusion suggests that the social boundaries between majority and minority in Norway are not entirely impermeable.

Integration as a process: the importance of length of residence

Length of residence is a recurring variable throughout the report and underscores that integration is a process that unfolds over time. However, length of residence has different implications depending on the dimension considered. The sense of belonging and Norwegian identity increases markedly with years spent in Norway. Trust in other people and in most institutions rises; and attitudes, particularly regarding gender equality, but also sexuality and family life, gradually become more liberal. Perceived discrimination declines somewhat, but only among European immigrant groups. Electoral participation also increases with length of residence. At the same time, the gap between feeling integrated and feeling accepted widens, and perceived political influence declines slightly among immigrants from country group 3. Here too, the integration paradox is evident: increased integration does not necessarily lead to more positive evaluations, but may generate higher expectations and a more critical view of society.

Main conclusions

Overall, the analyses suggest that social and subjective integration in Norway is progressing relatively well for the vast majority. Most people with an immigrant background feel well integrated and accepted, participate across a broad range of arenas, have high levels of trust in people and institutions, and have largely embraced the fundamental values on which Norwegian society is built.

At the same time, there are clear barriers to belonging and participation. Some are linked to skin colour: groups with a visible minority background systematically fare worse, particularly on dimensions relating to how they are treated by others. Some barriers are linked to class: education and employment are closely associated with a range of integration outcomes. Others are linked to religion, especially being Muslim. The overall picture is therefore not uniform, and it is entirely possible to identify smaller groups that experience different forms of subjective and social exclusion.

Integration can be understood as a process that, over time and across generations, reduces the distance between people with an immigrant background and the rest of the population along various dimensions. Yet this process, even when successful, is neither harmonious nor frictionless. Many of the factors we normally associate with successful integration, such as higher education, longer residence, and being born in Norway, are simultaneously associated with greater awareness of discrimination, a more critical view of social institutions, a sense of lacking recognition, and experiences of pressure

from both wider society and one's own ethnic or religious environment. This somewhat paradoxical element of the integration process manifests itself in many different ways and affects most strongly those with a visible minority background and a different religion. The friction is linked to real barriers, but it may also be an unavoidable element of the integration process itself, precisely because boundaries are rarely shifted or crossed without generating tensions.

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