


Patterns of service provision in child welfare investigations by migration background: A Swedish cross-sectional study

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Child welfare services
Decision-making
Migration background
Gender
Age
In-home services
Out-of-home care

ABSTRACT

International research has long suggested disparities in involvement with the child welfare system and access to child welfare services (CWS) between children from majority and non-majority populations. This study examines the associations between migration background and investigation outcomes for children with indicated problems investigated by CWS, stratified by gender and age. Using multinomial regression analyses and unique data from 1,519 completed child welfare investigations across eight agencies in Sweden, the study examines differences in the provision of both in-home services and out-of-home care, before and after adjustments for sociodemographic and case-specific factors. Compared to native-born children with native-born parents, both native-born girls and boys and younger children with at least one foreign-born parent, as well as foreign-born children aged 13 years or older, and foreign-born girls, had lower unadjusted odds of receiving in-home services. When adjusted for sociodemographic and case-specific factors, these differences were no longer significant. In contrast, foreign-born boys and native-born boys with at least one foreign-born parent aged 13 years or older had higher odds of receiving out-of-home care in both univariate and multivariate multinomial regression analyses. While these results may reflect an association between migration background and out-of-home care placement, the wide confidence intervals indicate that further research with larger sample sizes is needed to confirm whether this pattern is consistent and to identify potential underlying mechanisms driving decision-making rationales.

1. Introduction

The child welfare system (CWS) aims to protect children at risk of harm and support their families. Yet, disparities by migration and ethnic background may undermine this aim through unequal access to services. Although several studies document disparities in out-of-home care placements, evidence on in-home services remains limited—particularly within universal, family-service child welfare regimes such as Sweden's. Against this backdrop, this study examines investigation outcomes in Sweden, analyzing how migration background relates to both in-home services and out-of-home care, with specific attention to heterogeneity by gender and age.

Interpreting these patterns requires considering how migration and ethnic background are defined across countries. In the U.S., research has mainly focused on racial and ethnic disparities in decision-making, whereas in Europe and Scandinavia, migration and ethnic background are more commonly applied (e.g., Hemler & Kojan, 2024; Middel et al., 2020; Staer & Bjørknes, 2015). In Sweden, authorities are prohibited from collecting data on individuals' ethnicity, reinforcing the use of

migration-related indicators. Unlike racial and ethnic categorization, migration background reflects the place of birth and parental origin.

Despite differences in concepts, research has shown that disparities can occur at various stages of the decision-making process, from referrals (e.g., Hemler & Kojan, 2024; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013) to service provision (e.g., Maguire-Jack et al., 2020). In this context, disparities refer to unequal treatment and outcomes for one group compared to another. In comparison, disproportionality refers to the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of one group relative to its share in the reference population (Detlaff, 2014). Research has primarily sought to explain these issues through two theoretical models. The risk/need model suggests that ethnic minority and low-income families are exposed to increased risk factors, such as poverty, housing instability, or social marginalization, which elevate their need for child welfare services. In contrast, the bias model suggests that disparities may reflect bias among reporters and within CWS, rather than actual needs, which may lead to the overidentification of these families (Drake et al., 2011).

Results from previous studies have been mixed, with findings supporting both the risk and bias models. Several studies indicate that

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2026.108959>

Received 13 March 2025; Received in revised form 16 January 2026; Accepted 7 April 2026

Available online 11 April 2026

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disparities and the overrepresentation of children from minority groups diminish or even disappear after adjustments for sociodemographic factors (e.g., Franzén et al., 2008; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013; Staer & Bjørknes, 2015; Vinnerljung et al., 2008). Conversely, studies examining abuse and neglect suggest that increased risk primarily drives overrepresentation (e.g., Drake et al., 2011; Jonson-Reid et al., 2009). Other studies, however, suggest that ethnic differences persist even after adjustments for socioeconomic status (SES) among different ethnic subgroups and groups (e.g., Bywaters et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2020), indicating that socioeconomic factors alone cannot entirely explain the overrepresentation. In addition, research also indicates that discrimination and biased practices contribute to these disparities (e.g., Cénat et al., 2021).

However, both the risk and bias models have been criticized for treating risk and bias as separate and competing explanations. To address this limitation, Feely and Bosk (2021) propose the structural risk perspective, which complements these models by highlighting how structural factors such as racism, discrimination, and socioeconomic disadvantage both elevate risks and shape professional judgment in child welfare assessments. An intersectional perspective further highlights that disparities rarely stem from a single axis of inequality; rather, they often result from the intersection of multiple axes.

Emerging evidence suggests that both gender and migration background may influence assessments and thresholds (e.g., Kassman, et al., 2023; Loeb & Persdotter, 2025; Middel et al., 2020; Pettersson & Vogel, 2023; Vogel, 2012). Such assessments may not only reflect differences in actual needs, but also gender biases based on stereotypical ideas about girls' and boys' behaviors and vulnerabilities (e.g., Kalin et al., 2022). Problem profiles and the provision of services also vary by age: abuse, neglect, and violence are more common among younger children, and behavioral problems predominate among older children (Lundström et al., 2025). These dynamics suggest that migration background may interact with both gender and age in shaping child welfare outcomes, highlighting the need for stratified analyses when examining service provisions.

Internationally, disparities in CWS have mainly been studied in child protection systems in Anglo-Saxon countries. Still, a growing body of European research likewise shows that children with a migration background face unequal risks of investigation and service allocation (e.g., Kassman et al., 2023; Loeb & Persdotter, 2025; Staer & Bjørknes, 2015; Soydan, 1995). The Scandinavian context offers a critical case for comparison, as Nordic child welfare systems are often described as family-service models within a universal welfare state, emphasizing voluntariness, prevention, and collaboration with families (Gilbert et al., 2011; Korpi & Palme, 1998). In Sweden, this preventive approach is supported by the foundational principle of legal certainty, which establishes that investigations should be conducted equally for children with similar needs, ensuring equal access to services (Prop.1979/80:1 Del A s. 133 f). Nevertheless, questions remain as to whether service distribution is equitable in practice.

Swedish research has primarily focused on the overrepresentation of children with a migration background and risk of entry into out-of-home care, using national population register data. These studies show a higher unadjusted likelihood of placement compared to their peers with a Swedish background, but that these differences often diminish or disappear when controlling for socioeconomic factors (Franzén et al., 2008; The National Board of Health and Welfare, [NBHW], 2024; Vinnerljung et al., 2008). While such findings suggest the importance of structural disadvantage, they reveal little about decision-making processes within investigations or access to in-home services.

Furthermore, two national reports examining decision-making in first-time investigations and investigations related to suspected violence found that children with Nordic backgrounds are more likely to receive in-home services, while children from non-Nordic backgrounds are more likely to be placed in residential care (Swedish Agency for Health and Care Services Analysis, 2018; Persdotter & Andersson, 2020). Gender

differences also emerged, with girls receiving services more frequently than boys, while boys with a migration background were least likely to be granted services, commonly justified by a lack of parental consent for voluntary services (Swedish Agency for Health and Care Services Analysis, 2018; Persdotter & Andersson, 2020).

Complementing these findings, a national interview study with social workers identified additional factors that may contribute to unjustified differences in assessments and intervention decisions, including cultural perceptions, varying thresholds for service, language barriers, fear of social services, and external factors such as socioeconomic vulnerability and segregation (Equality Ombudsman, 2021).

Taken together, these findings highlight the need for studies to move beyond examining migration background in isolation and instead consider how it intersects with other dimensions, such as gender and age, to shape investigation outcomes. The present study aims to provide input by examining social workers' decisions regarding service provision for children with indicated problems, focusing on the association between children's migration background and investigation outcomes. Migration background is operationalized as being native-born with at least one foreign-born parent or foreign-born, following definitions used in European child welfare research (e.g., Middel et al., 2020). Furthermore, the study draws on risk and bias models, the structural risk perspective, and intersectional theory, which are applied in the interpretation of the results. Unlike prior register-based studies that examine care entry, this study focuses specifically on children who have undergone a child welfare investigation. By stratifying analyses by gender and age, the study aims to reveal new insights into subgroup-specific patterns in service access and provide a more nuanced understanding of how these factors may interact with migration background.

Drawing on unique cross-sectional data from 1,519 completed child welfare investigations from eight municipalities in Stockholm, Sweden, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

- What are the sociodemographic and case-specific characteristics of children with and without a migration background who undergo CWS investigations?
- How is migration background associated with investigation outcomes in CWS?
- How do investigation outcomes compare between children with and without a migration background, stratified by gender and age?

1.1. The Swedish context

Internationally, Sweden's child welfare system is often regarded as a family service model, emphasizing voluntariness, preventive services, and collaboration with parents (Gilbert et al., 2011). Rather than solely focusing on risk assessments, the system identifies and addresses the needs of children and families, and provides support tailored to those needs (Höjer & Pösö, 2023). The trajectory of children exposed to risk at home and/or behavioral problems has theoretically been described as a funnel. Where progressively fewer children advance through each stage of referral, investigation, and service provision (Östberg, 2010). Empirical studies show that only about one-half to one-third of the children investigated by CWS actually receive some type of services (e.g., Lundström et al., 2025; Heimer & Pettersson, 2023; Stranz et al., 2016). During the referral investigation, CWS workers assess the individual needs of families and children, potential future risks, and protective factors, and determine what type of support or intervention, if any, is needed.

Interventions provided can broadly be categorized into in-home services (e.g., family counseling/treatment, regular contact with a social worker, and contact persons/families) and out-of-home placements (OHC, residential care, and foster placements). These interventions can be provided with consent under the Social Services Act (SSA) (2001:453), or when consent is lacking, and there is a significant risk to

the child's health and/or development, through mandatory measures according to the *Care of Young Persons Act (CYPA) (1990:52)*.

Research has indicated that certain marginalized groups are over-represented in CWS, particularly children and families experiencing financial difficulties (Bywaters et al., 2020; Höjer & Pösö, 2023), children living with a single parent (Staer, 2016), and children with a migration background (e.g., Franzén et al., 2008). Socioeconomic vulnerability is more common among children with a migration background than those with a Swedish background (Statistics Sweden, 2022). Structural inequalities often explain this difference. In addition, findings from research on welfare practices have indicated a tendency among professionals to rely on cultural explanations when categorizing clients as “immigrants” when framing problems and formulating services (Eliassi, 2014).

2. Methods

2.1. Data

This study utilized cross-sectional data from an extensive research project following children and families through the child welfare investigation phase over five years. Baseline data were collected from all completed child welfare investigations across eight municipal agencies in Stockholm, Sweden, between November 2021 and April 2022 (n = 2,734). Of these 2,123 questionnaires were completed, resulting in a response rate of approximately 78%. These eight agencies represent municipalities that differ in demographic, socio-economic, and organizational conditions. For example, the municipalities varied in population size from approximately 30,000 to 85,000 inhabitants, and all municipalities exceeded the national average for fiscal capacity. Regarding demographic composition, the proportion of foreign-born residents aged 18-64 varied between 19% and 48%, with seven of the eight municipalities above the national average of 26%. Likewise, the proportion of residents aged 0-19 years ranged from 19% to 30%, compared with the national average of 23%. However, the municipalities represent a considerable variation of semi-rural and socially exposed areas, as well as urban districts (see Lundström et al, 2025; Kolada, 2024).

Data were collected on the children, their families, and their cases via comprehensive survey questionnaires completed by social workers responsible for the investigations. Seven areas were covered:

- *Demographic background* (e.g., age, gender, country of birth of child and parents, and family structure)
- *Parental education and employment*
- *Previous CWS involvement* (e.g., previous investigations and services in the municipality)
- *Reasons for actualization of the current investigation* (e.g., application/referral and reasons for actualization)
- *Investigation processing* (e.g., interview with the child as part of the investigation)
- *Assessed problems related to the parents, the home environment, and/or the child's behavioral issues.*
- *CWS services*

2.2. Procedure

Data were collected through a paper questionnaire distributed and returned by key contact persons at each CWS agency. Two research assistants visited each agency monthly to provide assistance and enter manual data into SPSS. Questionnaires were completed by the social workers responsible for child welfare investigations, or, if unavailable, by a colleague with case knowledge (e.g., first-line manager). These informants participated in their professional roles and were not affiliated with the research team. As the respondents were social workers rather than the children themselves, neither parental nor the children's

consent was obtained. This had been ideal, but would likely have contributed to substantial attrition and practical challenges like increased burden for the CWS agencies on behalf of the social workers and the clients. In Sweden, this use of data without consent can be justified when the social benefits of a study are considered more important than the potential harm inflicted by the intrusion on the individual integrity of the participants. The project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reference number 2021-01535). To ensure the integrity of clients, all data were pseudonymized and treated confidentially. Questionnaires and data files were kept in a secure locker, accessible only to members of the research team.

2.3. Study population

As mentioned, the original dataset consisted of 2,123 completed investigations. For the purpose of this study, an analytical sample was created. Only investigations with available data regarding sociodemographic background information were included. Consequently, unaccompanied children (n = 105) were excluded from the sample, as there was no information about family structure or other relevant socio-demographic factors. Additionally, 55 children who had already been placed in out-of-home care at the time of the investigation were excluded to focus the analysis on new services provided during the current investigation and to reduce potential bias in estimating the probability of out-of-home care. This resulted in a sample of 1,963.

Additionally, 426 investigations were excluded due to missing data on the children's and/or parents' birth countries, 15 investigations were excluded due to missing data on the child's gender, and an additional three were excluded due to missing information about age. This resulted in a total sample of 1,519. Missing data were present only for two control variables: living with a single parent (6 %) and maternal poor labor market attachment (17%). To handle this missing data, missing categories were used for these two variables to retain observations and increase statistical power. Due to substantial missing data (28.5%) in the study's main independent variable – migration background – a missing data analysis was conducted, to determine whether missing data in the included variables were random or systematic. Missing value analysis showed no significant differences between the analytical and initial samples for gender, age, assessed problems, and previous in-home services. However, the analysis showed a significant difference in the proportions of children who had previously been placed in out-of-home care. Children in the analytical sample had previously been placed in residential care to a slightly lesser extent than those in the initial sample.

2.4. Variables

The outcome variable measures the result of the investigation as an unordered categorical variable, reflecting the decision with which the investigation was completed: (0) 'No intervention'; (1) 'In-home services' (e.g., family counseling/treatment, systematized contact with a social worker, and contact person/family)'; (2) 'Out-of-home care' (i.e., foster care, emergency foster care, residential care/institutions, and supported housing). The most common placement in the sample was emergency foster care placement, followed by foster care and residential care.

The independent variable of the focus of this study is 'migration background', which is operationalized as whether the child and/or their parents were born in Sweden or abroad. A vast majority of the children in the sample were born in Sweden 83%, while 17 % of the children were born abroad. Due to significant missing data on specific birth countries of fathers and mothers, and to increase statistical power, the variable is broadly defined into three study groups: (0) 'native-born with native-born parents'; (1) 'native-born with at least one foreign-born parent'; (2) 'foreign-born'. The first category was used as the reference category.

Guided by previous research on CWS involvement and approval of services, as well as available data, the control variables included a set of sociodemographic and case-specific factors. Data on sociodemographic

variables were coded as binary based on information on the child's gender: (1) 'Girl'; (0) 'Boy', age: (1) ' ≥ 13 years'; (0) '0-12 years', and living with a single parent: (1) 'Yes' (of whom the vast majority lived with a single mother); (0) 'No'. Furthermore, to control for socioeconomic factors, two variables were created: financial hardship and maternal poor labor market attachment. Maternal poor labor market attachment was coded as: (1) 'Yes' (i.e., unemployed, on sick leave, or incarcerated); (0) 'No'. Financial hardship was coded as (1) 'Yes' (i.e., at least one parent receiving social assistance and/or those assessed with financial difficulties during the investigation); (0) 'No'.

Regarding case-specific factors, three variables were created. Information on assessed problems during the investigation was coded into a four-categorical variable: (0) 'Problems related to both parents and the child's behavioral issues'; (1) 'Parental problems'; (2) 'Behavioral problems related to the child'; (3) 'No assessed problems'. The first category was used as the reference category. Information on previous services in the municipality was coded as binary variables: previous in-home services in the municipality, and previous out-of-home care were each coded as: (1) 'Yes'; (0) 'No'.

Lastly, municipality variations have been shown to influence assessments of services within CWS (e.g., [Stranz et al., 2016](#)). Municipality affiliation was coded as an eight-categorical variable referring to the municipalities included in the study.

2.5. Statistical analyses

The statistical analyses were carried out in four steps. First, descriptive statistics were conducted for the full sample and the three groups. Two-sample tests of proportions were done with the command `prtest`, to examine whether differences between native-born children with native-born parents and the two study groups defined as having a migration background were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). These comparisons were performed for all study variables.

Second, to assess whether migration background was associated with the decision outcome regarding services, a multinomial logistic regression was estimated for the full sample. Third, gender-stratified analyses were performed by estimating two separate multinomial regression models for boys and girls. Fourth, two sets of multinomial regression analyses were performed, one model for the age group 0-12 years and one for ≥ 13 years. For all unadjusted and adjusted models, clustered standard errors were employed. Since the investigations in the analysis were clustered by municipalities, clustered standard errors were used to account for potential heteroskedasticity within clusters of observations (e.g., [Jayatilake et al., 2011](#)). All models report odds ratios (OR) along with 95% confidence intervals (CI). Furthermore, significance levels are noted at 0.001, 0.01, 0.05, and 0.10. The inclusion of a 0.10 level allows for reporting trends toward significant results, which is particularly relevant given the small sample size of the study and the even smaller proportion (6.5%) of investigations that were completed with out-of-home care placements.

Logistic regression analysis is commonly used to assess the association between an independent variable and a categorical outcome while controlling for observed confounding factors. When comparing unadjusted and adjusted coefficients in logistic regression, differences can result from confounding effects or rescaling bias ([Williams, 2009](#)). Rescaling here refers to a situation where the sizes of a variable's coefficients depend on both the error variance of the model and the included variables in the model ([Karlson et al., 2012](#)). All regression models were estimated using the Karlson/Holm/Breen (KHB) method to address challenges with rescaling bias and to facilitate comparison between unadjusted and adjusted odds ratios ([Karlson et al., 2012](#)). All analyses were performed in Stata/SE 18.0 (StataCorp LLC, College Station, TX, USA).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

[Table 1](#), provides descriptive statistics for the full study population and the three study groups, including bivariate comparisons between native-born children with native-born parents and the other two study groups, using two-sample tests of proportions.

The sample ($n = 1519$) consisted of approximately 35% native-born children with native-born parents, 48% native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent, and 17 % foreign-born children. A majority, about two-thirds, were assessed as not requiring any services. Investigations were closed more often without services for native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent (67%) than those with native-born parents (62%). No significant differences were observed for foreign-born children. Around one-third (29%) of the sample received in-home services. This was significantly more common for children with native-born parents (34%) than for those with at least one foreign-born parent (26%) and foreign-born children (27%). In contrast, out-of-home care placements were significantly more common for children with a migration background. This included 7% of children with at least one foreign-born parent and around 11% of foreign-born children, compared to 4% of those with native-born parents.

Moving to the demographic factors, around 47% of the sample were girls, and there were no significant gender differences between the three study groups. More than one-third (38%) of the children were aged 13 years or older at the time of the investigation, which was significantly more common among native-born children with native-born parents (41%), compared to those children with at least one foreign-born parent (29%). In contrast, foreign-born children were significantly more likely to be aged 13 years or older (58%) than native-born children with native-born parents. One-fourth (27%) of the children lived with a single parent, with higher rates among children with a migration background, (28% of native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent and 33% of foreign-born children), compared to 21% of native-born children with native-born parents. For 6% of the children, there was no information about family structure.

Concerning socioeconomic factors, 16% of the children had a mother with poor labor market attachment (e.g., unemployed, on sick leave, or incarcerated). This was slightly more common among native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent (19%), compared to native-born children with native-born parents (15%). In about one-sixth (17%) of the investigations, there was no information about the mother's labor market attachment. Approximately 9% of the children in the sample lived with parents experiencing financial hardship. This was significantly more common for native-born children with a foreign-born parent (10%) and foreign-born children (19%), compared to native-born children with native-born parents (4%).

Turning to assessed problems at the time of the investigations, one-third (31%) of the children were assessed as having both parental and behavioral problems. Compared to foreign-born children, native-born children with native-born parents were significantly more likely to be assessed with both parental and behavioral problems, with rates of 26% and 34% respectively. Parental problems were assessed in 45% of all the investigations, which were more common for native-born children with at least a foreign-born parent (48%), followed by native-born children with native-born parents (44%) and foreign-born children (41%). However, these differences were not significant.

For 13% of the children, behavioral problems were assessed. In comparison, to native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent, it was significantly more common for native-born children with native-born parents to have behavioral problems, 10% and 16%, respectively. There were only minor differences between the sample of native-born children with native-born parents and those foreign-born, with rates of 16% and 15%, respectively. In around one-tenth (11%) of the investigations, no problems were assessed. Children with a

Table 1
Sample characteristics, proportions, by group.

Variables	Full sample ^a	Group 1. Native-born with native-born parents ^b	Group 2. Native-born with at least one foreign-born parent ^c	Group 3. Foreign-born ^d	Difference 1 versus 2	Difference 1 versus 3
Outcome						
Investigation						
No intervention (ref.)	64.4	61.7	67.2	61.8	-2.02*	-0.02
In-home services	29.1	34.3	26.1	27.0	3.13**	2.05*
Out-of-home care	6.5	4.0	6.7	11.2	-2.04*	-3.88***
Independent						
Migration background						
Native-born with native-born parents (ref.)		34.6				
Native-born with at least one foreign-born parent			48.4			
Foreign-born				17.0		
Sociodemographic						
Gender (ref. boy)	47.1	49.1	46.3	45.5	1.01	0.94
Age >13 (ref. 0–12)	38.3	41.1	29.3	57.9	4.39***	-4.43***
Living with a single parent (ref.no)	26.5	21.3	27.9	32.8	-2.64**	-3.49***
Missing	5.9	5.3	5.2	8.9		
Maternal poor labor market attachment (ref.no)						
Unemployed, on sick leave or incarcerated	16.3	15.1	19.1	11.2	-1.85†	1.47
Missing	17.1	17.9	15.2	20.9		
Financial hardship (ref.no)	9.2	3.8	9.5	18.9	-3.88***	-7.02***
Case-specific factors						
Assessed Problems during the investigations						
Problems related to both parents and the child's behavioral issues (ref.)	31.2	33.5	31.3	26.3	0.84	2.07*
Parental problems	45.2	43.8	47.9	40.5	-1.43	0.87
Behavioral problems related to the child	12.9	15.6	10.1	15.4	2.95**	0.06
No assessed problems	10.7	7.1	10.8	17.8	-2.24*	-4.59***
Previous in-home services in the municipality (ref.no)	29.2	28.2	31.6	24.7	-1.29	1.03
Previous out-of-home care(ref.no)	8.2	6.3	7.9	12.7	-1.09	-3.06**

Note: †p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

^an = 1519.

^bn = 525.

^cn = 735.

^dn = 259.

^e= Difference in proportions between Group 1 (native-born children with native-born parents) and Group 2 (native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent), tested using the two-sample test of proportions.

^f= Difference in proportions between Group 1 (native-born children with native-born parents) and Group 3 (foreign-born children), tested using the two-sample test of proportions.

migration background had a significantly higher proportion of investigations completed without any assessed problems, with rates of 11 % for native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent and 18% for foreign-born children.

Lastly, around one-third (29%) of the children had received previous in-home services in the municipality, and 8% had prior out-of-home care. The differences between the three study groups were only significant for out-of-home care placements and between native-born children with native-born parents (6%) and foreign-born children (13%).

3.2. Multinomial logistic regression analyses

Table 2, reports unadjusted and adjusted associations between migration background and the outcome of the investigations for the full sample (Supplementary Table S1 presents the fully adjusted regression model, including estimates for all control variables). The results are based on KHB multinomial regression models with no intervention as the base outcome. Starting with the association between migration background and the odds of granting in-home services instead of no intervention. In comparison to native-born children with native-born parents, unadjusted estimates suggest that native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent in the full sample (n = 1519), had 36% lower odds of being granted in-home services (OR = 0.64, p = 0.005). However, the lower odds were no longer significant after adjustments for sociodemographic and case-specific factors. Similar patterns were

Table 2

Associations between child welfare investigation outcomes and migration background for the full sample (n = 1519). Results from KHB multinomial logistic regression analysis.

		In-home services		Out-of-home care	
		OR	CI (95%)	OR	CI (95%)
Native-born with native-born parents (ref.)					
Native-born with at least one foreign-born parent	Unadjusted	0.64**	0.46–0.87	1.63	0.53–5.04
	Adjusted	0.76	0.51–1.13	2.33	0.66–8.16
Foreign-born	Unadjusted	0.68	0.39–1.20	2.99*	1.05–8.47
	Adjusted	0.95	0.56–1.61	4.38*	1.24–15.47

Note: Base outcome = No intervention. OR = odds ratio. CI = Confidence interval. KHB = Karlsson/Holm/Breen. †p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. The adjusted model controlled for gender, age, living with a single parent, maternal poor labor market attachment, financial hardship, assessed problems during the investigation, previous in-home services in the municipality, previous out-of-home care, and municipality affiliation. Intercept and control variables suppressed. Standard errors are clustered by municipality.

observed for foreign-born children. In the full sample, these children appeared somewhat less likely to be granted in-home services and more likely to be granted some type of out-of-home care instead of no intervention. However, statistical significance was only reached for out-of-home care for foreign-born children (OR = 2.99, $p = 0.040$). In the adjusted model, the odds for these children further increased and remained significant, although the confidence intervals were wide.

Table 3, reports unadjusted and adjusted associations between migration background and the outcome of the investigations stratified by gender. These results are also based on KHB multinomial regression models with no intervention as the base outcome. Gender-stratified analyses showed that both native-born girls (OR = 0.48, $p < 0.001$) and boys (OR = 0.64, $p = 0.057$) with at least one foreign-born parent had lower unadjusted odds of receiving in-home services. These significant differences were no longer present in the adjusted analysis, for either girls or boys. However, similar unadjusted patterns were observed for foreign-born children, with both girls and boys in this group having around 50% lower odds. Notably, these results were only significant for girls (OR = 0.45, $p < 0.001$), however after adjustments the odds were no longer significant.

Regarding being granted some type of out-of-home care compared to no intervention, the unadjusted results suggest that both boys and girls in the study groups defined as having a migration background had higher odds compared to their native-born peers with native-born parents. For girls, a significant association was absent. In contrast, for those foreign-born boys, the odds were higher (OR = 5.26, $p = 0.043$), compared to native-born boys with native-born parents. For native-born boys with at least one foreign-born parent, the tendency was fairly close but did not reach significance (OR = 3.68, $p = 0.098$). Adjusting for confounding factors did not alter the overall results.

Table 4, reports unadjusted and adjusted associations between migration background and the outcome of the investigations stratified by age. These results as well are based on KHB multinomial regression models with no intervention as the base outcome. When dividing the sample by age groups, the unadjusted results show that younger (0–12 years) native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent had lower odds of being granted in-home services (OR = 0.67, $p = 0.068$). Likewise, foreign-born children aged 13 years or older had 56% lower odds (OR = 0.44, $p = 0.014$) of receiving this type of services, compared to their native-born peers with native-born parents. However, these reduced odds were not significant in the adjusted analyses.

There were no significant differences in being granted any type of out-of-home care for the youngest children in the sample. In contrast, children aged 13 years or older, both those native-born with a foreign-born parent (OR = 3.54, $p = 0.032$) and foreign-born children (OR = 4.19, $p = 0.044$) had higher odds of receiving this type of service. After adjustments for sociodemographic and case-specific factors, the associations remained significant and even strengthened, although the confidence intervals were wide.

4. Discussion

This study examined social workers' decisions regarding service provision for children with indicated problems, focusing on the associations between migration background and investigation outcomes. The results are interpreted through the lens of risk and bias models, the structural risk perspective, and intersectional theory. Stratified analyses were used to examine how migration background is associated with gender and age to shape patterns of service access.

The descriptive results suggest that, among children with completed investigations, those categorized as native-born with one foreign-born parent represent the largest proportion of the sample subjected to an investigation, followed by native-born children with native-born parents. However, there were no gender differences between the study groups, but foreign-born children tended to be older at the time of the investigation. Furthermore, the results suggest that children with a migration background generally faced greater socioeconomic disadvantage than their native-born peers with native-born parents. They were more likely to live in single-parent households and experience financial hardship, patterns that align with broader sociodemographic trends in Sweden (cf. [Statistics Sweden, 2022](#)). These are risk factors that have been shown to increase the probability of being reported to and investigated by CWS (e.g., [Höjer & Pösö, 2023](#); [Staer, 2016](#)). According to the risk/need model, families experiencing severe financial hardship may also face a higher prevalence of psychosocial challenges (cf. [Drake et al, 2011](#)).

However, despite their more disadvantaged socioeconomic position, children with a migration background were more frequently assessed as having no identified problems at the time of the investigation and were more likely to have their investigation closed without any services. One possible explanation for these findings is that these children may be referred to CWS at lower thresholds due to biases in reporting, rather than due to actual higher levels of need and risk (cf. [Drake et al., 2011](#)). Another explanation may be that social workers apply different norms and expectations when assessing children from diverse backgrounds, leading to varying thresholds for determining service needs (cf. [Equality Ombudsman, 2021](#)). Furthermore, these findings highlight the complexity of assessing service needs in a diverse population and the potential influence of implicit biases on decision-making processes.

Findings from analysis of the full sample show that native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent have lower odds of receiving in-home services before adjusting for sociodemographic and case-specific factors. These results align with a previous Swedish national report, which showed that children with a migration background are underrepresented in receiving in-home services and overrepresented in being granted out-of-home care ([Persdotter & Andersson, 2020](#)). However, in the current study, these differences were no longer significant in the adjusted models. Statistically, this suggests that once children from different backgrounds were compared on similar socioeconomic and case-related conditions, no significant differences remained in the likelihood of receiving in-home services. However, as

Table 3

Associations between child welfare investigation outcomes and migration background stratified by gender. Results from KHB multinomial logistic regression analysis.

		Boys(n = 803)		Out-of-home care		Girls (n = 716)		Out-of-home care	
		In-home services		OR	CI (95%)	In-home services		OR	CI (95%)
Native-born with native-born parents(ref.)									
Native-born with at least one foreign-born parent	Unadjusted	0.64†	0.40–1.01	3.68†	0.79–17.20	0.48***	0.32–0.72	0.92	0.30–2.82
	Adjusted	0.72	0.42–1.22	5.53*	1.10–27.84	0.87	0.51–1.49	1.20	0.26– 5.47
Foreign-born	Unadjusted	0.57	0.24–1.39	5.26*	1.06–26.17	0.45***	0.29–0.69	2.64	0.62–11.33
	Adjusted	0.88	0.37–2.10	9.46*	1.70–52.56	1.06	0.62–1.82	3.40	0.79–14.61

Note: Base outcome = No intervention. OR = odds ratio. CI = Confidence interval. KHB = Karlsson/Holm/Breen. † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. All adjusted models controlled for age, living with a single parent, maternal poor labor market attachment, financial hardship, assessed problems during the investigation, previous in-home services in the municipality, previous out-of-home care, and municipality affiliation. Intercept and control variables suppressed. Standard errors are clustered by municipality.

Table 4

Associations between child welfare investigation outcomes and migration background stratified by age. Results from KHB multinomial logistic regression analysis.

		0–12 years (n = 938)				≥13 years (n = 581)			
		In-home services		Out-of-home care		In-home services		Out-of-home care	
		OR	CI (95%)	OR	CI (95%)	OR	CI (95%)	OR	CI (95%)
Native-born with native-born parents(ref.)									
Native-born with at least one foreign-born parent	Unadjusted	0.67 [†]	0.43–1.03	1.38	0.36–5.21	0.79	0.54–1.17	3.54*	1.12–11.36
	Adjusted	0.75	0.43–1.30	1.28	0.29–5.59	0.87	0.55–1.40	3.90*	1.03–14.67
Foreign-born	Unadjusted	0.94	0.52–1.71	0.42	0.13–1.38	0.44*	0.23–0.84	4.19*	1.04–16.81
	Adjusted	1.48	0.83–2.64	2.36	0.71–7.91	0.70	0.39–1.28	5.77*	1.23–27.12

Note: Base outcome = No intervention. OR = odds ratio. CI = Confidence interval. KHB = Karlsson/Holm/Breen. [†]p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. All adjusted models controlled for gender, living with a single parent, maternal poor labor market attachment, financial hardship, assessed problems during the investigation, previous in-home services in the municipality, previous out-of-home care, and municipality affiliation. Intercept and control variables suppressed. Standard errors are clustered by municipality.

some of these conditions may themselves reflect structural inequalities and/or discriminatory practices, these results should not be interpreted as free from potential biases in child welfare provision (cf. Feely & Bosk, 2021). Further, differences across studies highlight the need for further research to determine whether service allocation is influenced by factors beyond those captured in the present study.

The results of the stratified analyses highlight, from an intersectional perspective, how the intersection between migration background, gender, and age shapes child welfare service outcomes in complex ways regarding out-of-home care. The absence of significant differences for girls and the youngest children, regardless of migration background, suggests that vulnerability may be evaluated differently across social categories. One possible explanation is that assessments of the youngest children primarily focus on their need for protection and are less influenced by other sociodemographic factors or bias. Similarly, the needs and vulnerabilities of girls may be assessed in comparable ways, regardless of migration background. In contrast, for boys and children aged 13 years or older with a migration background, the higher odds of placement remained significant even after adjustments. These findings suggest the presence of biases related to gender, age, and migration background in the provision of child welfare services. This echoes Middel et al.'s (2020) study on parental gender and migrant background in child maltreatment cases, which also revealed potential gender and migrant disparities in child welfare decisions.

However, these results contrast with findings from prior population-based register studies, which suggest that the overrepresentation of children with a migration background in out-of-home care diminishes or disappears after adjustments for demographic and socioeconomic factors (e.g., Franzén et al., 2008, Staer & Bjørknes, 2015; Vinnerljung et al., 2008). A plausible explanation for this discrepancy lies in methodological differences such as design, setting, sample size, and outcome definition. Unlike register-based studies, which examine placement risk at a population level, this study focuses specifically on children who have undergone an investigation. Within this context, placement decisions may be influenced by additional factors beyond traditional sociodemographic adjustments. For instance, social workers' assessments may be influenced by perceived risks, family engagement, or service availability, variables not included in the current study but that may contribute to disparities in placement decisions following CWS investigations.

Although this study controls for a comprehensive set of assessed problems, these broad categorizations do not provide information on the extent, severity, or risk assessments of these problems. Therefore, it is difficult to determine, based on this study, whether the risk/need assessments differ because these boys have different actual needs and/or more extensive problems requiring more comprehensive services, or whether it is more a matter of how these children's behaviors and their families' problems are assessed and perceived by the social workers. Theoretically, this finding can be understood through two models: risk and bias. The risk model suggests that a higher likelihood of out-of-home placements reflects a higher actual prevalence of risk factors and severe

needs among these boys. In contrast, the bias model emphasizes the role of social workers' perceptions in shaping assessments. Feely and Bosks' (2021) structural risk perspective complements these models by highlighting how structural inequalities such as discrimination and socioeconomic disadvantage both elevate the risk these boys face and influence social workers' assessments. From this perspective, the observed differences in service provision reflect not only individual risk factors and bias, but also the impact of broader institutional and social inequalities that may shape how these boys are assessed.

Another possible explanation for the higher odds of out-of-home care placements for these boys, in line with previous national reports from Sweden (Swedish Agency for Health and Care Services Analysis, 2018; Persdotter & Andersson, 2020), is that boys with a migration background are less frequently provided with voluntary in-home services than other groups of children, due to a lack of parental consent. Since it was not possible to control for consent in this study, it is not possible to establish whether it may have influenced these placement decisions, which is an aspect that should be further investigated.

In line with this, another possible explanation could be that social services face challenges in reaching children with early interventions due to structural factors such as language barriers, mistrust, or fear of social services (cf. Equality Ombudsman, 2021) and/or a lack of tailored services that meet the needs of diverse families. These potential challenges may lead to barriers to accepting voluntary services and contribute to the escalation of problems, thereby making more extensive services, such as out-of-home care, necessary.

5. Strengths and limitations

To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first study in a Swedish context to use a relatively large sample to examine the association between migration background and the provision of both in-home and out-of-home care services, stratified by gender and age. A key strength of the study is that it is derived from completed child welfare investigations conducted by eight agencies, which reflect the actual decision-making processes for children with indicated problems. Moreover, the ability to control for assessed problems related to both children and/or the parents, as well as sociodemographic and case-specific factors, strengthens the internal validity of the findings.

However, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. From an intersectional perspective, the role and authority of social workers should not be taken for granted. Their interpretations and assessments of risk are not entirely objective but are shaped by professional norms and broader social contexts (see e.g., Lupton, 2013). In line with this, the study is further limited by its reliance solely on professionals' perspectives on the CWS investigations, which may introduce bias in the findings. The questionnaires primarily capture pragmatic rather than ethical considerations, such as how the child's best interests are interpreted and negotiated in practice. Similar patterns were observed in a study from Norway on care orders, where decisions are largely justified through pragmatic, risk-oriented arguments and

assessments of parental capacity to change (Løvlie & Skivenes, 2021). Moreover, the social workers' own intersectional positions and their potential influence on assessments and decision-making remain unexamined, an issue that future studies should address. In addition, despite including a comprehensive set of control variables, the potential influence of unmeasured factors cannot be excluded.

Another limitation is the broad categorization of migration background, which only reveals fundamental patterns of differences in service access and does not account for the heterogeneity within these groups. Specifically, they do not provide more nuanced information about various groups with a migration background (e.g., according to the specific country of origin, the reason for migration, and the length of stay). This limitation may affect the interpretation of the findings, as it is likely that different subgroups encounter varying forms of facilitators and barriers to service access. Future research should therefore aim to use more detailed categorizations when examining service access.

Additionally, this study focuses on children with indicated problems investigated by CWS in eight agencies, limiting its generalizability to other settings. Notably, establishing the generalizability of these findings is also difficult because the municipalities included in the study have a higher proportion of residents with a migration background than the national average in Sweden (Kolada, 2024).

A further limitation is the relatively small number of children receiving out-of-home care ($n = 99$), which becomes even smaller when categorized by migration background and stratified by gender and age. This resulted in wide confidence intervals, indicating a high degree of statistical uncertainty in the findings. Bootstrap analyses further confirmed this, reinforcing the need for cautious interpretation.

Although the odds ratios for out-of-home care for older boys with a migration background increased after adjustments, KHB analyses suggested this was not due to rescaling bias, and sensitivity analyses revealed no suppression effects. Moreover, the predicted probabilities changed only slightly between the unadjusted and adjusted models. This suggests that although the adjusted models indicate stronger relative differences in risk between groups, the actual likelihood of placement did not shift substantially when adjusting for sociodemographic and case-specific factors.

6. Conclusions and implications

By interpreting the results through the risk and bias models, the structural risk perspective, and an intersectional lens, and by examining outcomes within a family-service-oriented welfare regime, this study contributes new insights to international debates on equity and justice in child welfare. The findings highlight complex and varied patterns of service for children with indicated problems investigated by CWS. Furthermore, the findings reveal important differences in service provision among children with and without a migration background and across gender and age groups. While sociodemographic and case-specific factors largely explained disparities in the provision of in-home services, differences in out-of-home care for older boys with a migration background persisted even after adjustments. These findings may suggest the presence of potential bias and/or unjustified disparities in service provision, underscoring the need to consider how intersecting factors and broader structural inequalities may shape children's pathways through CWS.

However, while these results may reflect an association between migration background and out-of-home care placements, the wide confidence intervals in these estimates indicate a high degree of statistical uncertainty. Nevertheless, the observed patterns underscore a need for further research with larger sample sizes to confirm whether this pattern is consistent and, if so, to identify potential underlying mechanisms driving decision-making rationales. Future studies should also consider factors such as parental consent to voluntary services, which may influence placement decisions but were not accounted for in this study.

Building on this, further research should also examine which children and families are investigated by CWS, what types of problems and needs are identified, and whether these identified problems differ between children with and without a migration background, as well as by gender and age. Moreover, rather than examining these factors separately, these studies should apply an intersectional approach to identify subgroups of children and the problems assessed for them, exploring how these factors intersect to shape children's pathways through CWS.

Together, the findings echo other international and European studies by indicating that inequity and potential bias also occur in family-oriented child welfare systems within welfare states characterized by universalism. These patterns highlight systemic issues across child welfare systems and underscore the need for policymakers, CWS agencies, and social workers to enhance their awareness and understanding of potential bias, including unconscious biases related to migrant background, gender, and age, when making decisions about service provision. Furthermore, this is essential to ensuring equitable access to services for all children involved with CWS.

Source of funding: The Swedish Research Council (FORTE/For-skningsrådet om Hälsa, Arbetsliv och Valfärd).

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2026.108959>.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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