

Challenges for small municipalities in sparsely populated areas to detect children at risk and in need of support

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In a recent research project in Västerbotten, financed by The Public Health Agency, one of the aims was to detect and describe what certain factors of significance there are in a small municipality in sparsely populated areas in discovering children at risk. In this study “at risk” aimed at children that are living with parents having an abuse of alcohol and/or mental disorders. Three municipalities were chosen to represent these areas and data was mainly collected through interviews.

One major factor with great impact is that “everybody knows everybody”. With a small number of inhabitants in small villages the chance that you know your neighbor more than by name is high. This is most often described as very positive, people help and takes care of each other, but there can also be other sides to it. As example it is not obvious that it will come to the authorities’ knowledge that a child needs support if the adults are afraid to destroy their own contact with each other. On the other hand it can be difficult to gain confidence and trust in the small villages if you once have lost it and fallen outside the mainstream.

The school is the single most important factor for these children to be seen. All children go to school and it is therefore of huge importance that teachers, student health, caretakers or others within school are observant and available for the children. Already within preschool there must be an observance of the family situation and signs from the child. The personal must also know how and when they should talk to the parents and what to do if they are worried for the child’s wellbeing.

When someone is working in a public organization you are obliged to directly make a report to social services if it comes to you knowledge that a child might be in need of support. The law is the same for healthcare and for persons working in schools but it was found in the study that at first they usually try to solve problems and support children within their own organization. One reason for this was that they knew that the social services most often have limited resources for family support and that there was a lack of trust. It can also be that they know the parents and that it leads to hesitation in making a report.

Cooperation between authorities involved is needed, but not always so easy to achieve. When few persons have big areas of interest to cover their time is often limited. The persons are often more important than their function and when people move to another place or ends their employment a functioning cooperation can easily be destroyed. On the other hand can these small municipalities provide great cooperation in many areas due to personal contacts and easy access to each other.

These and other factors are to be discussed.