

Nordic Children and Young People in Figures 2021



Nordic Council
of Ministers

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FOREWORD

The wellbeing of children and young people, and their ability to exercise their rights, are prerequisites for the continued development of the Nordic region and for realising the Nordic Council of Ministers' vision of making the Nordic region the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030. All children and young people have the right to social and economic security, to good physical and mental health, to recreational and cultural opportunities, to an identity and language and to opportunities to learn and develop. Children and young people are therefore priority groups for the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The Nordic Committee for Children and Young People (NORDBUK) is the Nordic Council of Ministers' advisory and coordinating body in matters relating to policy on children and young people. NORDBUK commissioned this report as part of its mission to gather and disseminate knowledge about children and young people's living conditions in the Nordic region.

Nordic Children and Young People in Figures 2021 contains statistics and brief descriptions of children and young people in the region. The indicators show how far the region has come but also illustrate challenges that remain to be addressed in terms of demography, family and care, health, education, the labour market and income, as well as leisure and culture. This data will hopefully be useful for anyone seeking reliable and comparable data on children and young people in the Nordics.

The selection of indicators was based on advice from [Nordregio](#) and [NORDBUK](#). They are based on existing, relevant and comparable statistics across the Nordic countries and mainly drawn from Nordic Statistics Database, a collection of comparative statistics collated by the Nordic Council of Ministers since the 1960s. Most of the data is gathered from the Nordic Statistical institutes, Nomesco-Nososco, Eurostat, the OECD, and the UN. The Nordic Statistics Database supports the work of the Nordic governments and parliamentarians in forging bonds, solutions and cooperation throughout the region. Data for the indicators has also been drawn from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study. HBSC is a World Health Organization (WHO) collaborative cross-national study of adolescent health and wellbeing.



Photo: Johnér

1. DEMOGRAPHY

Nordic and European populations are ageing, and those who work shoulder a larger burden in paying for welfare through taxes. This development may not be unmanageable for the Nordics since generous family policy has increased the fertility rate, and immigration has also been higher than in the rest of Europe.

1.1 Fertility

The number of children that parents have is influenced by a variety of social, economic, cultural, demographic and other factors. A total fertility rate of around 2.1 children per woman is necessary for a population to replace itself in the long run.

Other than Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, all of the Nordic countries have had fertility rates at or below replacement level since 1975. The only parts of the Nordic Region that currently have a fertility rate on or above replacement level are Greenland, with a rate of 2.1 and the Faroe Islands, with a rate of around 2.5 children per woman.

Compared to the EU average, the Nordic countries have performed significantly better since 2002. However, both Norway and (especially) Finland are below the EU average of 1.5 children per woman.

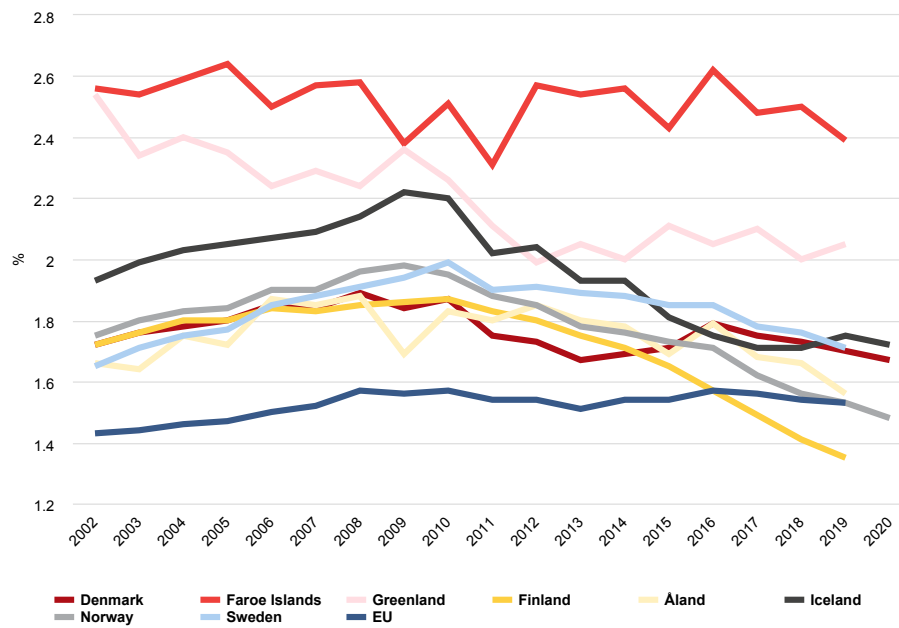


Figure 1.1 Fertility rate: total number of live births per woman

Source: [NordicStatistics.org/population](https://nordicstatistics.org/population)

1.2 Children and young people's demography

Young people are a vitality marker for the regions in which they live. The Nordic region is like the rest of Europe in terms of ageing, albeit doing so at a slower pace than the EU average. On 1 January 2020, the Nordic population as a whole stood at 27.5 million people, of whom 9.8 million (or 36 %) were children or young people (aged 0-29 years). This is slightly higher than the EU average of 32 %. The EU average and the Nordic average were the same in 2001 (37%).

Nordic countries differ considerably with regard to the proportion of children and young people in the population – ranging from Greenland, with a share as high as 42% in 2021 (decreasing over recent years, however), through to Åland, with a proportion around the EU average of 32%.

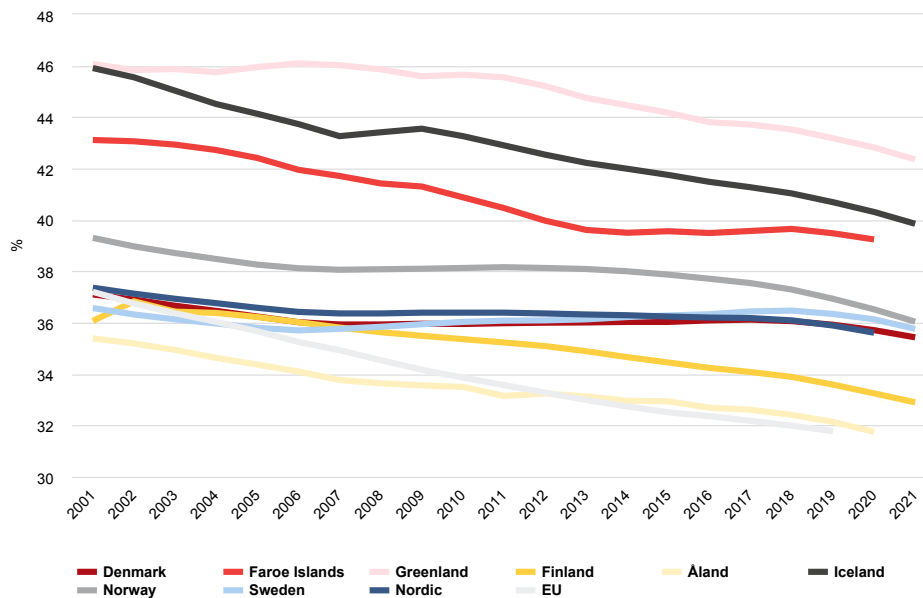


Figure 1.2 0-29 year olds as share of total population

Source: [NordicStatistics.org/population](https://nordicstatistics.org/population)

1.3 Gender distribution of young adults aged 20-29

Without migration, the gender distribution in a country is expected to be balanced moving forward. This is also the case in most Nordic countries. However, men are the majority among young adults 20-29 years in all of the countries. There is an undue distribution of boys among young adults in the Faroe Islands and Åland, especially.

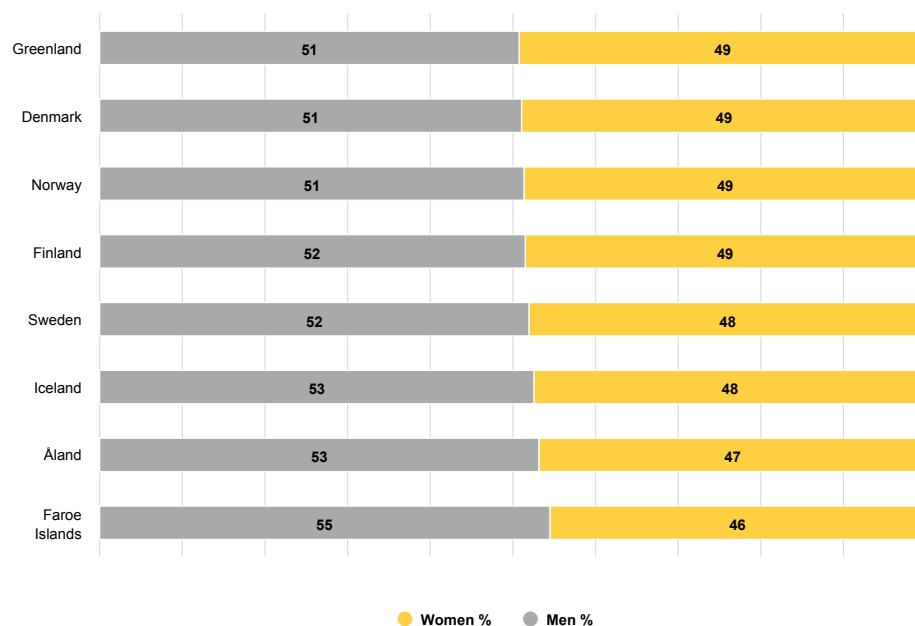


Figure 1.3 Gender distribution of young adults 20-29 years. 2020

Source: [NordicStatistics.org/population](https://nordicstatistics.org/population)



Photo: Johnér

2. PHYSICAL HEALTH

Many of the following statistics are generated from the results of the [Health Behaviour in School-aged Children](#) (HBSC) study. HBSC is a collaborative WHO cross-national study of adolescent health and wellbeing. HBSC focuses on understanding young people's health in a social context – at home, school, and among family and friends. It aims to improve understanding of how these factors, individually and collectively, influence young people's health throughout early adolescence.

2.1 Bodyweight

The number of children living with obesity has increased in recent decades. The World Health Organization currently ranks childhood obesity as one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century. Nordic children are less obese than average for countries in the HBSC study. Boys have a higher prevalence of obesity than girls in all countries, other than for Greenland.

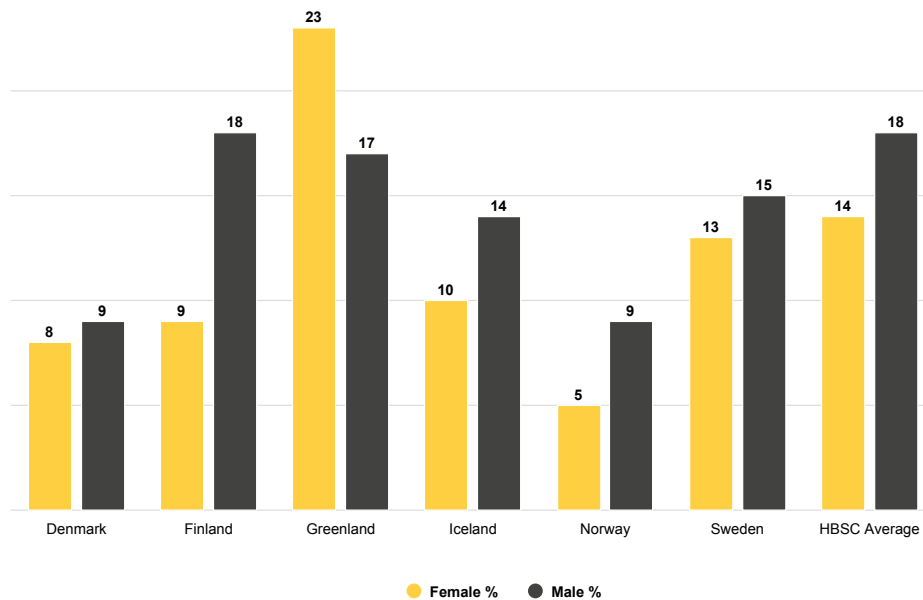


Figure 2.1 Proportion of young people 11 years-of-age with overweight problems or obesity, 2018

Source: WHO – Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (<http://www.hbsc.org>)

2.2 Smoking

Although cigarette smoking has been on the decline in most HBSC countries, the number of current users remains high among 15-year-olds. A comparison between Nordic countries shows considerable contrasts, with Iceland having the lowest levels and Finland the highest proportion of young people aged 15 years who have tried smoking. It should be noted that the relatively high numbers in Finland have come down from what were even higher numbers in the 2013/2014 survey when females scored 43 and males 51.

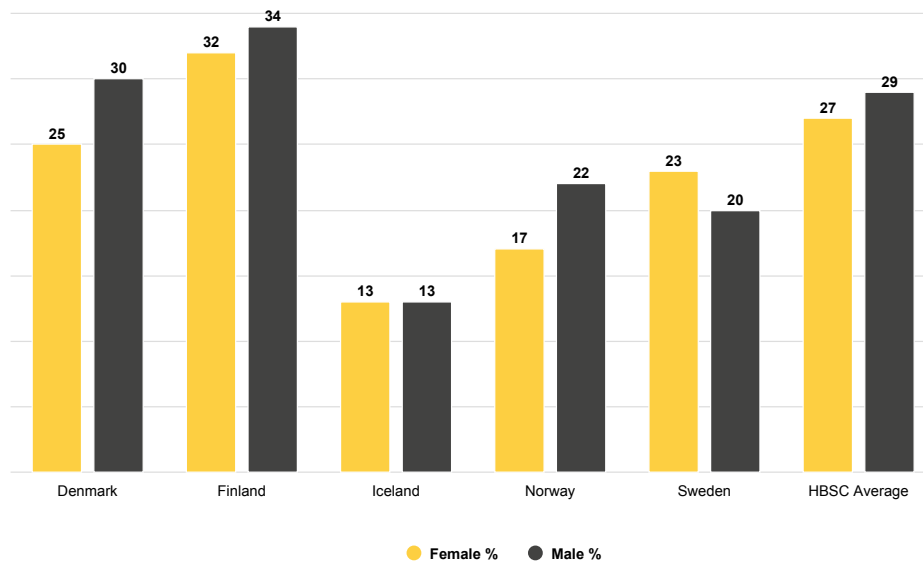


Figure 2.2 Proportion of young people aged 15 years who have smoked for 1-2 days or more in their lifetime, 2018

Source: WHO - The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (www.hbsc.org)

2.3 Alcohol

The figure below shows the proportion of young people aged 15 years who have drunk alcohol in their lifetime. Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden are below the HBSC average in this age demographic, while Finland and especially Denmark are above the average.

The widest gap between female and male drinking habits is in Norway, where boys are 8 percentagepoints higher than females. In addition, Norway is the only Nordic country where girls seem less exposed to alcohol than boys. In Greenland, the gender difference is also significant – with girls having their alcohol debut much earlier than boys.

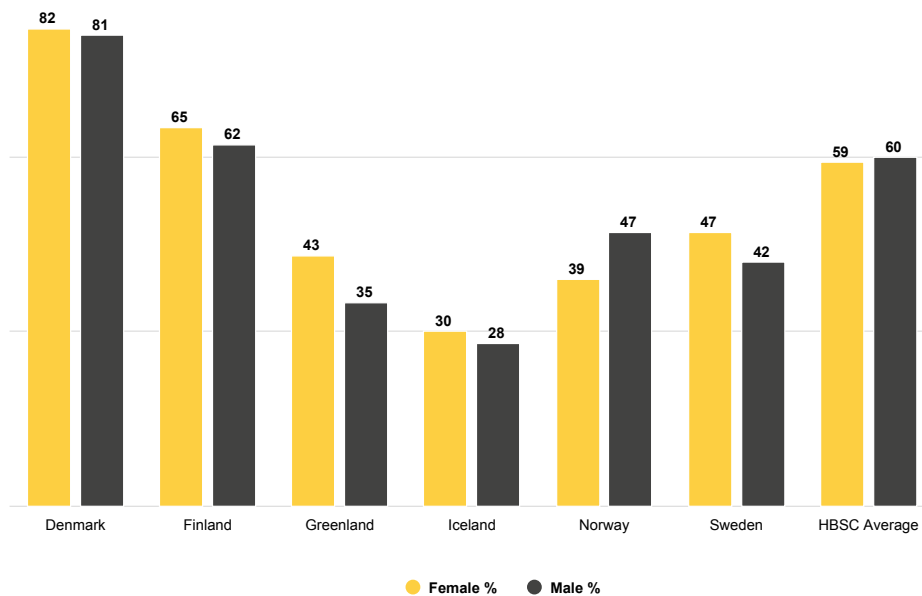


Figure 2.3 Proportion of young people aged 15 years who have drunk alcohol in their lifetime, 2018

Source: WHO - The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (www.hbsc.org)

2.4 Dental Health

Oral health is a key indicator of overall health, wellbeing and quality of life.¹ It is, therefore a relevant general indicator of the state of the life of children and youth. The proportion of 16- to 24-year-olds who say that they have no unmet needs to declare when it comes to dental health varies a good deal across the Nordics – both over time and between countries. Nordic countries are performing worse than the EU average overall, with the only exception here being Sweden.

Sweden, Norway and Iceland have seen an increase in the proportion mentioned here, while both Finland and Denmark have seen a negative trend. Sweden has improved over the past ten years, starting from a position at the bottom and moving to a position at the top. This indicates an improvement in overall health, wellbeing and quality of life among 16- to 24-year-olds in Sweden during this period.

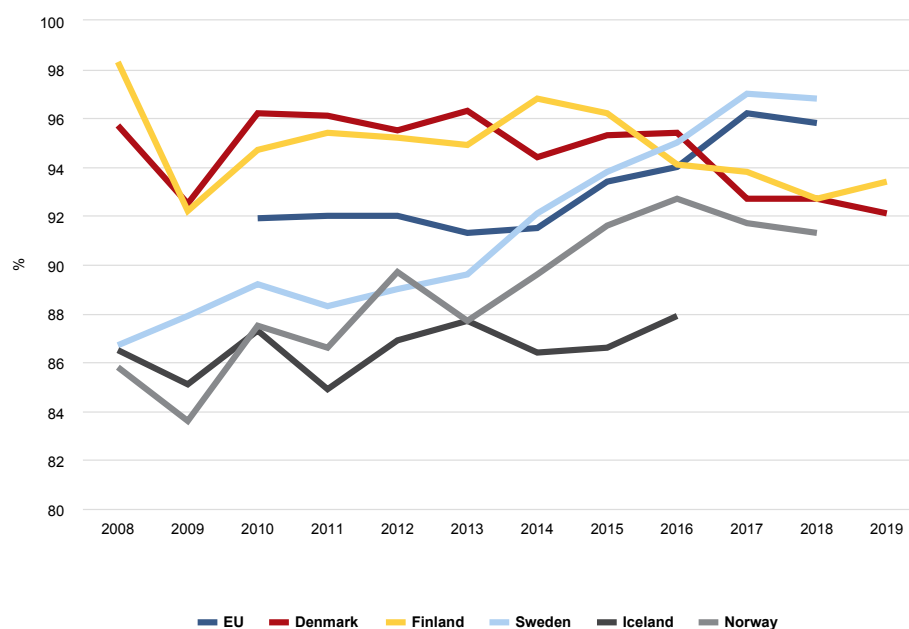


Figure 2.4 Percentage of young people aged 16-24 who have no unmet needs to declare

Source: Eurostat (ec.europa.eu/Eurostat)

1. https://www.who.int/health-topics/oral-health#tab=tab_1



Photo: Johnér

3. MENTAL HEALTH

Promoting psychological wellbeing, and protecting children and young people from adverse experiences and risk factors that may impact their potential to thrive, are critical for their overall wellbeing during adolescence and for their physical and mental health in adulthood.

The following statistics (3.1-3.3) are generated from results of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC). They offer insight into the wellbeing of children and young people throughout the Nordics. Suicide statistics (3.4) are based on figures from Nososco-Nomesco.

3.1 Life satisfaction

Even though the overall sense of satisfaction and mental wellness is declining, most Nordic countries demonstrate better results here than for HBSC countries in general. However, there is a significant gender gap in this area. Swedish girls are the only group who demonstrate lower life satisfaction levels than those in HBSC countries overall. In general, according to the HBSC study, boys report higher levels of life satisfaction and excellent health and lower levels of multiple health complaints.

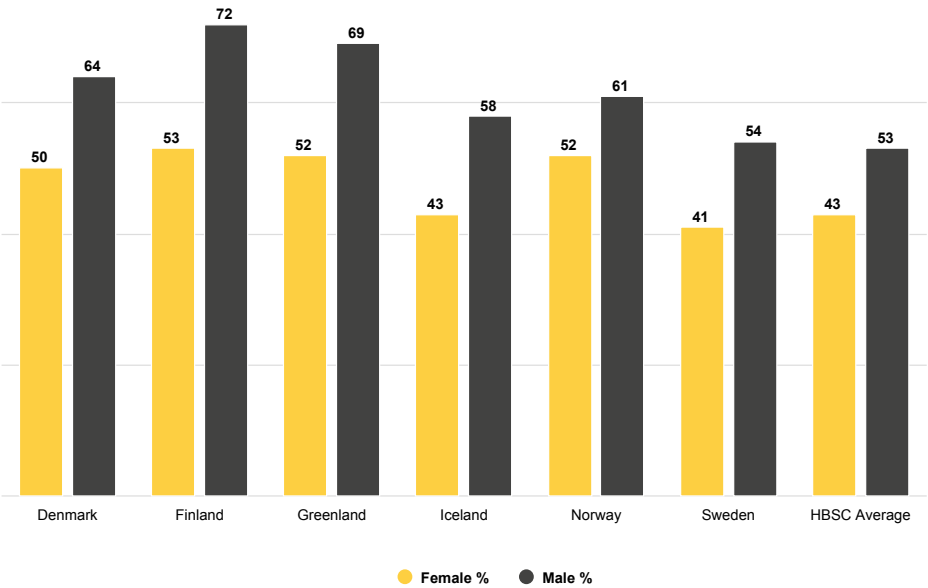


Figure 3.1 Percentage of young people aged 15 years who report high levels of life satisfaction, 2018

Source: WHO – The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children. (www.hbsc.org)

3.2 Physical fighting

Adolescents who fight are at risk of involvement in additional problematic behaviours, such as alcohol and other substance abuse. Research shows that levels of violence are related to socioeconomic factors. Inequality intensifies social hierarchies, reduces social control over violence, increases feelings of dissatisfaction and resentment and fosters a harsh social environment in which conflict is more likely to occur.

According to the HBSC study, these levels of problematic behaviour have been on a steady decrease across all countries and regions up until the 2013/2014 round of assessment. The last survey round, however, provides evidence that this trend might have been broken in Finland (for girls), Sweden (for both girls and boys) and Iceland (for both girls and boys).

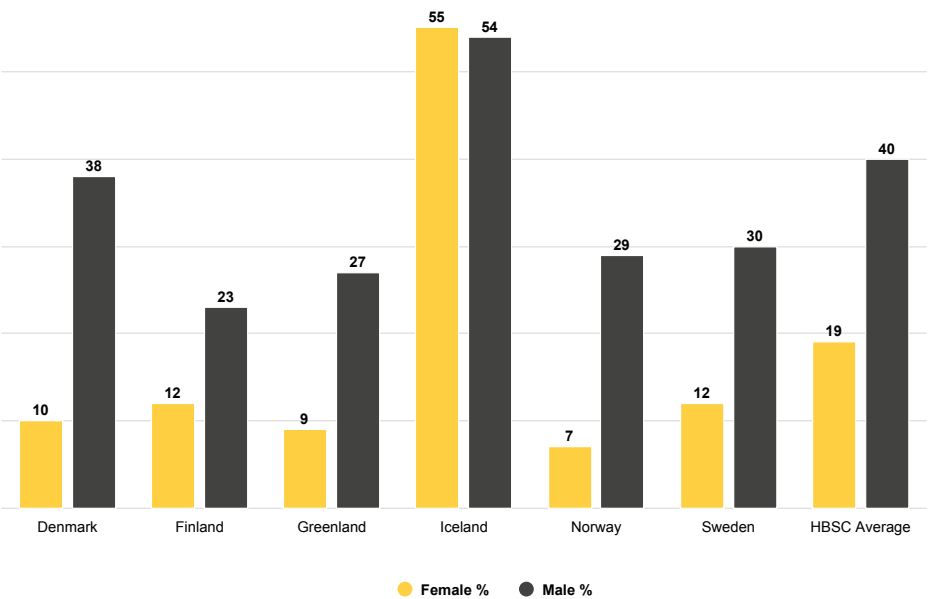


Figure 3.2 Proportion of young people aged 15 years who have been involved in a physical fight at least three times in the past 12 months, 2018

Source: WHO – The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children. (www.hbsc.org)

3.3 Exposure to bullying

The figure below indicates the proportion of young people aged 15 who have been bullied at least once or twice at school during the previous couple of months. The most notable change since the 2013/2014 survey round is for Swedish boys, as their figure is up from 7% to 18% in 2017/2018.

The highest proportion in this category is among girls in Greenland, whose experience of bullying is 16 times higher than the level in Iceland, for example. Unlike face-to-face bullying, where the rates are similar among both genders, girls are more likely to be cyberbullied, especially around age 13.

According to this study, boys are more likely to be perpetrators of both physical and online violence, while girls are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying. Boys reported higher involvement in physical fights, bullying and cyberbullying. Younger adolescents are particularly vulnerable, and they are more likely to be victims of bullying. There is no clear link between social inequalities and violent behaviour in this category.

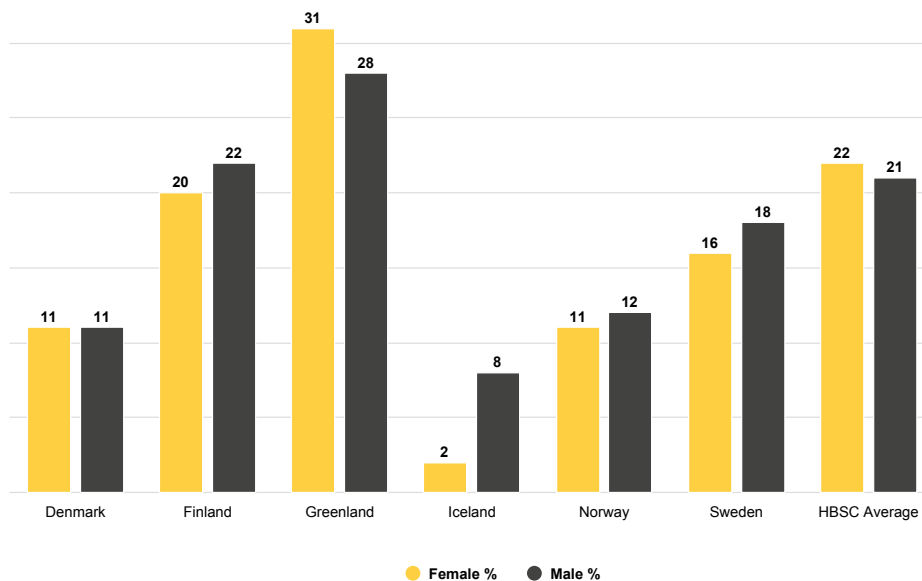


Figure 3.3 Proportion of young people aged 15 years who have been bullied at least once or twice at school during the previous couple of months, 2018

Source: WHO – The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children. (www.hbsc.org)

3.4 Suicide

Suicide occurs at all ages. It is the second leading cause of death among 15-to 29-year-olds globally. As far as Nordic countries are concerned, Greenland is by far the worst hit by suicide among young people – and among other age groups, too. Suicide is significantly more prevalent among boys than girls throughout the Nordic countries.

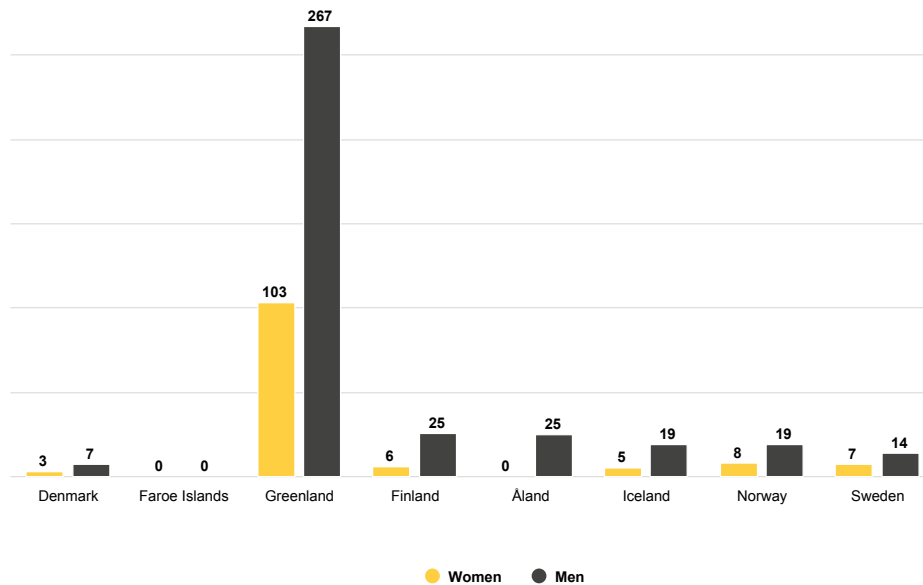


Figure 3.4 Number of deaths per 100,000 by suicide, 20-24 year olds, 2015

Source: [NordicStatistics.org/nordic-gender-equality-indicators](https://nordicstatistics.org/nordic-gender-equality-indicators)



Photo: Johnér

4. FAMILY AND LIVING CONDITIONS

Children growing up in poverty and social exclusion are less likely to do well in school, to enjoy good health, or to realise their full potential later in life. Good family and living conditions, in general, are vital for children and young people's ability to do well in life.

4.1 Child poverty

The poverty rate among the 0- to 6-year-old age group has been relatively stable across most Nordic countries from 2004 to 2019, as seen in the figure below. Sweden is the exception, with a notable increase in poverty during this period and with a rate above the EU average.

Sweden is also an exception in terms of a comparison with the EU. Here, together with Romania, France, Luxembourg, Spain and Slovakia, the poverty rate for children aged 0-18 exceeded that of the whole population by more than 4% on average.

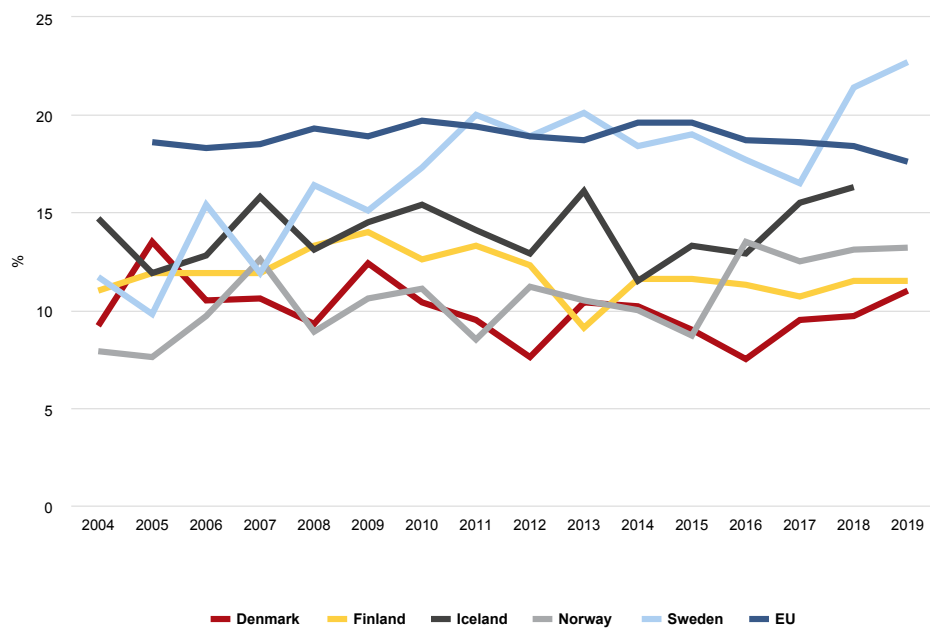


Figure 4.1 At risk of poverty rate in age group 0-6 years

Source: Eurostat ([ec.europa.eu/Eurostat](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat))

4.2 Children in daycare

Childcare arrangements throughout the Nordic region are among the most generous in the world. This is reflected in the high proportion of children in daycare – so that almost every child between 3 and 5 years of age is enrolled in some form of pre-school institution. Access to affordable and quality childcare enables working parents, especially mothers, to pursue careers and to combine family- and work-life. The Faroe Islands contains the highest proportion of children in daycare across the Nordic region.

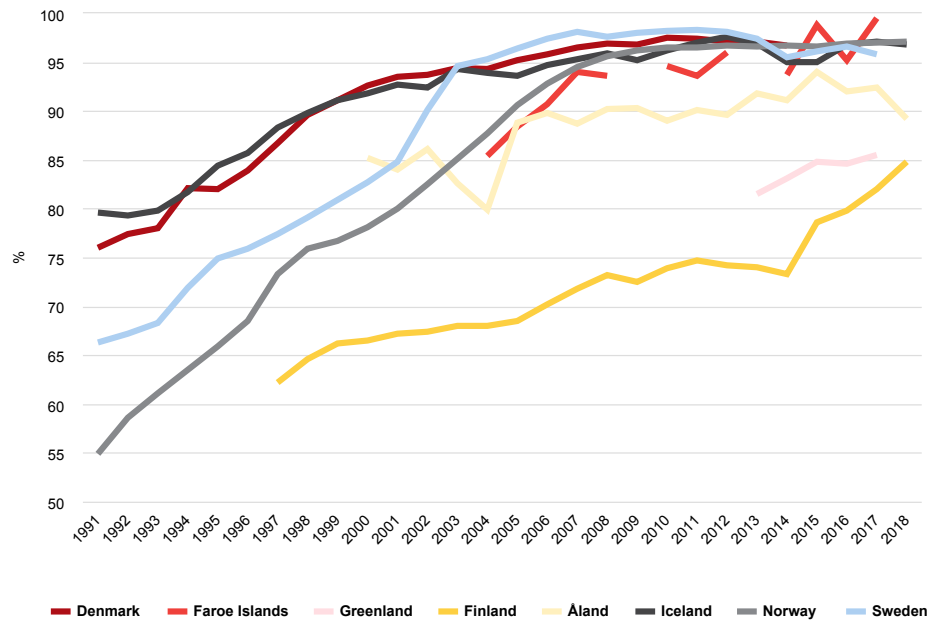


Figure 4.2 Children aged 3-5 years in day-care

Source: [NordicStatistics.org/social-integration-and-income](https://nordicstatistics.org/social-integration-and-income)

4.3 Leaving home

Young adults aged 20-24 years are much more likely to have moved away from their parents' homes in the Nordic countries, compared with their peers in EU countries. The gendered differences are also smaller in the Nordics than in the EU, other than for Finland – where young male adults seem to have a substantially higher tendency to live in the same household as their parents than young female adults.

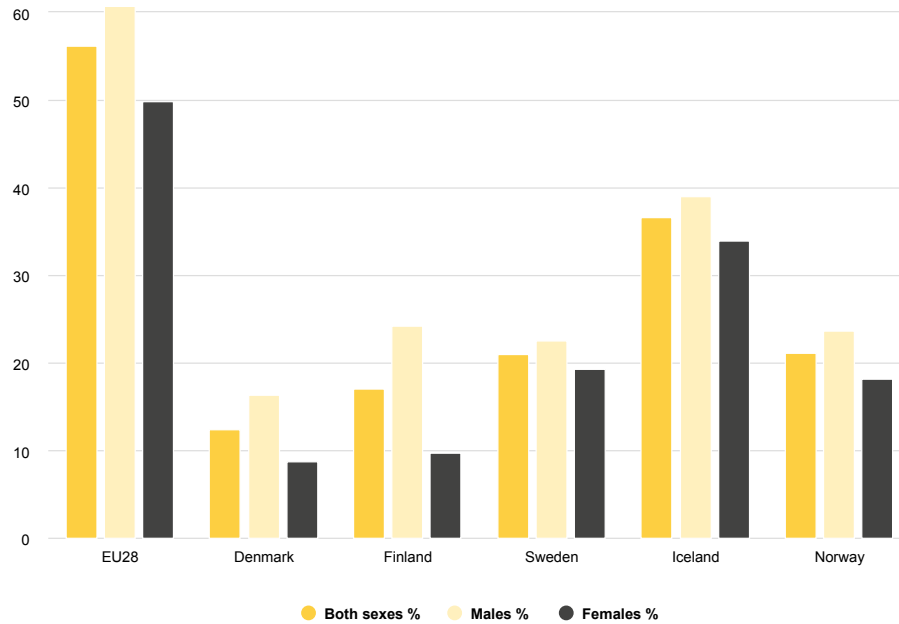


Figure 4.3 Proportion of young adults aged 20-29 years living with their parents, 2019

Source: Eurostat ([ec.europa.eu/Eurostat](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat))



Photo: Johnér

5. EDUCATION AND SKILLS

The future does not simply appear out of thin air. It is created. The aim is to prepare children and young people for the future, even though nobody knows quite what that will look like. In this context, education and training are key to developing the competencies of the future.

5.1 Educational skills (PISA)

PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures the ability of 15-year-olds to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges. Finland is still in the lead here, especially in terms of reading and science. In 2018, Denmark was the first Nordic country to perform better than Finland in any of these fields over the years, achieving a better score in mathematics in 2018.

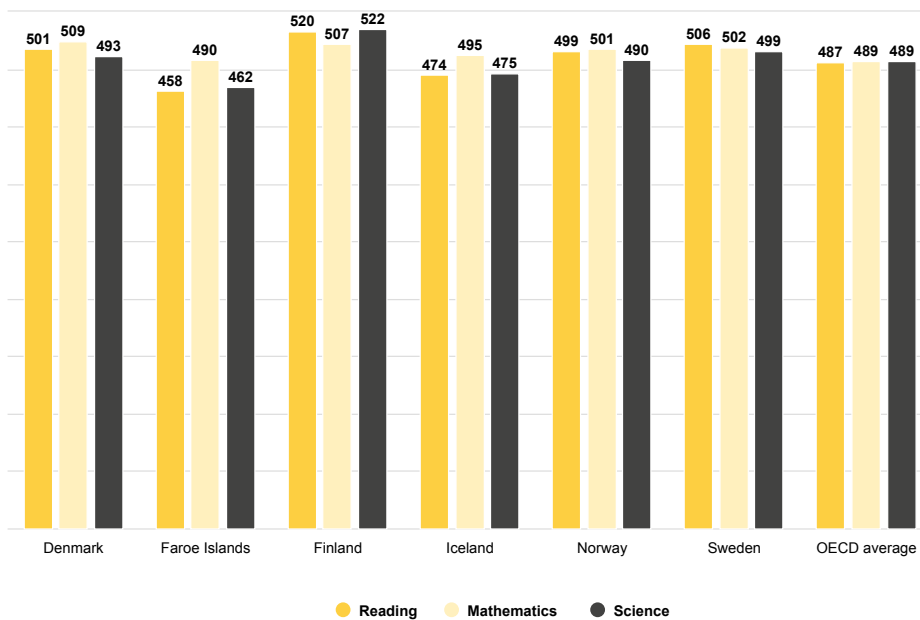


Figure 5.1a PISA result 2018

Source: [NordicStatistics.org/education](https://nordicstatistics.org/education)

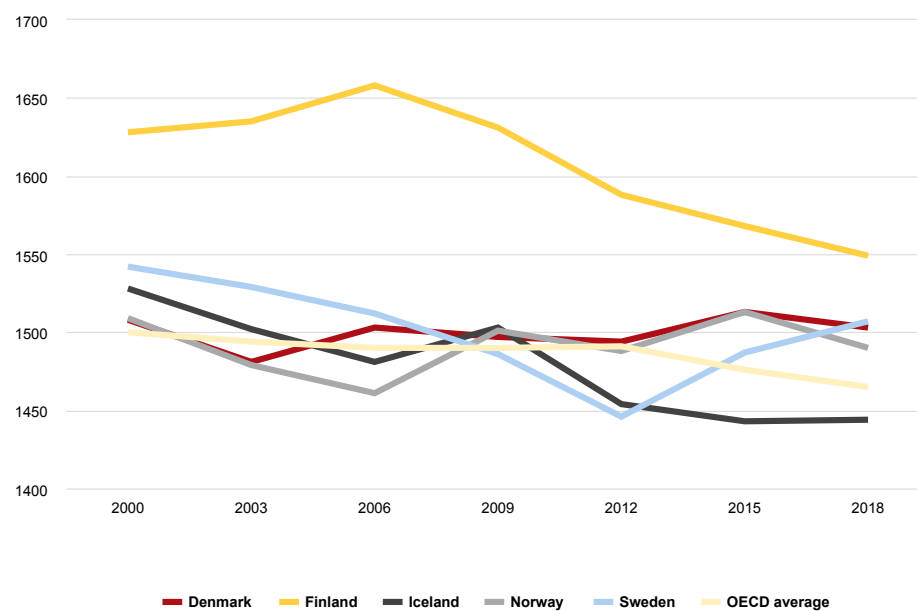


Figure 5.1b Total PISA-score: Sum of mathematics, reading and science

Source: [NordicStatistics.org/education](https://nordicstatistics.org/education)

5.2 PISA scores by gender

The figure below indicates gendered differences in scoring by domain in the survey round for 2018. It shows that there are still large and observable gender differences, especially in reading – where girls achieve markedly better results. In Denmark and the Faroe Islands, boys score better than girls in maths, which is in line with the situation in OECD as a whole. However, it is contrary to the situation in other Nordic countries, where girls outperform boys in this domain.

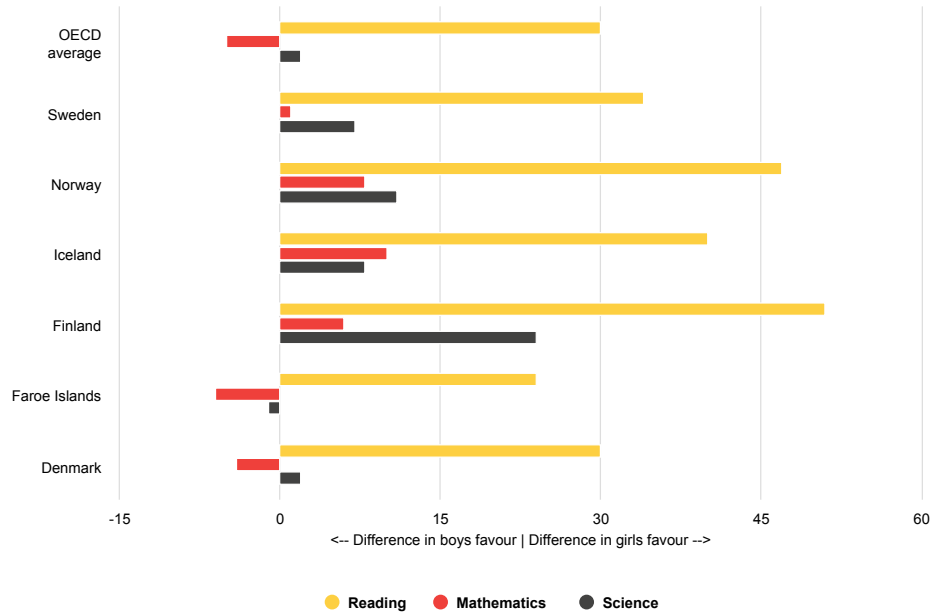


Figure 5.2 Gender gap in PISA test scores. 2018

Source: [NordicStatistics.org/education](https://nordicstatistics.org/education)

5.3 Tertiary education

Nordic countries are among the most advanced in the world in terms of labour markets and economies that require a well-educated and trained population to function effectively. Correspondingly, Nordic countries have a high percentage of people who have benefitted from tertiary education. The figure below shows the percentage of 30- to 34-year-olds who possess a tertiary level of education. Note the larger proportion of females to males at this level of educational attainment. The largest proportion, both for males and females, is in Iceland – where the gender gap is also most significant.

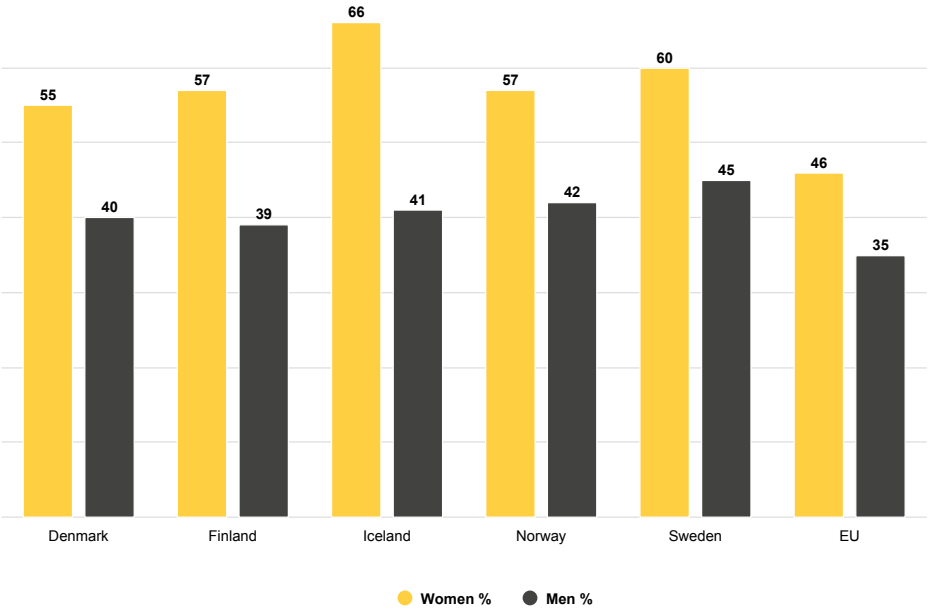


Figure 5.3 Proportion of 30- to 34-year-olds with a tertiary education, 2019

Source: [NordicStatistics.org/education](https://nordicstatistics.org/education)

5.4 Early leavers from education and training

Leaving school early is a significant concern across the Nordic Region, though to varying degrees. The figure below indicates the percentage of the population between 18-24 years who have completed lower secondary education at most and who are not involved in further education or training. From a pan-European perspective, the Swedish and Finnish averages in 2019 fell well below the EU average of 10.2%.

Overall, the Norwegian and Danish averages are close to the EU average and to the target. The trends in these two countries are, however, different. Norway has been in the process of lowering its proportion of early leavers over the past four-year period, while Denmark has seen an increase. The average rate of early school leaving in Iceland (and especially in Greenland) is substantially higher than in other Nordic countries and with comparison to the EU average.

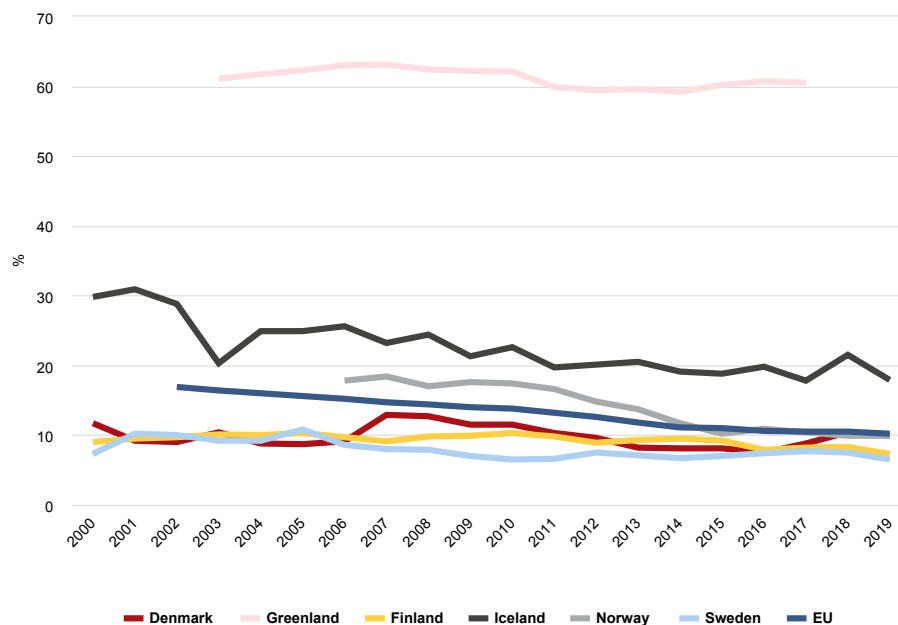


Figure 5.4 Early school leavers. Percentage of 18 to 24-year-olds with a lower secondary education and who are not involved in further education and training

Source: [NordicStatistics.org/education](https://nordicstatistics.org/education)



Photo: Getty Images

6. WORKING LIFE

A good working life has always played a crucial role in the evolution of the welfare state across the Nordic region and in the personal development of its people – including young people.

6.1 Youth unemployment

Following a sharp peak in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, youth unemployment has been steadily decreasing across the Nordic region. The figure below shows the unemployment level for the 15 to 24 years age group. Sweden and Finland have the highest unemployment rate, which is above the EU average.

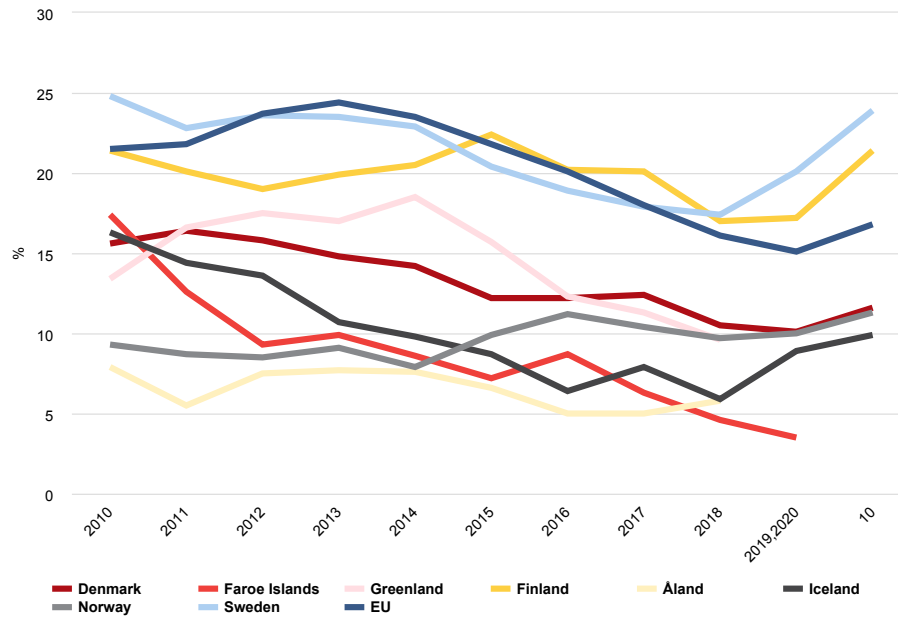


Figure 6.1 Unemployment rate among 15 to 24-year-olds

Source: [NordicStatistics.org/labour-market](https://nordicstatistics.org/labour-market)

6.2 Young people not in employment, education or training (the NEET-rate)

There is a range of reasons why a particular young person may become part of the 'NEET-group', including (but not limited to) complex personal or family-related issues and young people's greater vulnerability in the labour market during times of economic crisis. Successful re-engagement of these young people is a key challenge for policymakers. It is vital to reducing the risk of long term unemployment and social exclusion later in life.

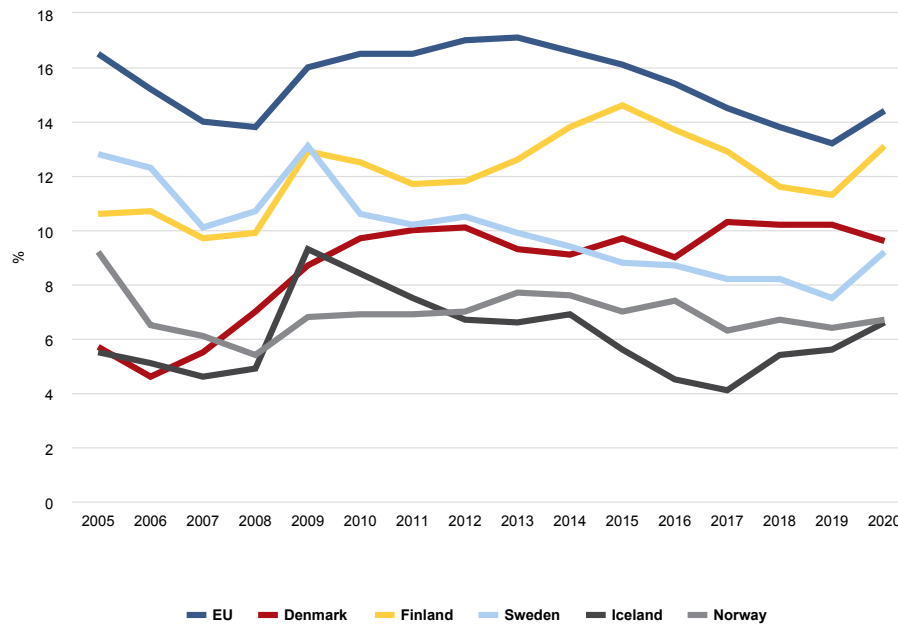


Figure 6.2 Percentage of 18 to 24-year-olds neither in employment nor in education and training

Source: Eurostat (ec.europa.eu/eurostat)

6.3 Gig economy and precarious work

Precarious work refers to that portion of the workforce that fills permanent job needs but is denied permanent employee rights. Young people are usually more prone to this kind of set-up, often referred to as the 'gig economy'. While this type of arrangement offers flexibility, and while it can be the result of active choices by workers, it can also be more or less enforced by the absence of alternative, permanent employment positions. Regardless of which condition applies, unstable employment conditions result in lower wages, a lack of social benefits and more dangerous working conditions.

The figure below indicates the percentage of employees aged 20 to 29 years working on temporary contracts, 2004 to 2019. The trend is not uniform across the Nordics, it should be noted. Sweden has seen a five-year annual decrease, having had the highest level of working on temporary contracts throughout the Nordics since 2005. Together with Finland, Sweden still tops this trend, with around 30% of young employees working on temporary contracts.

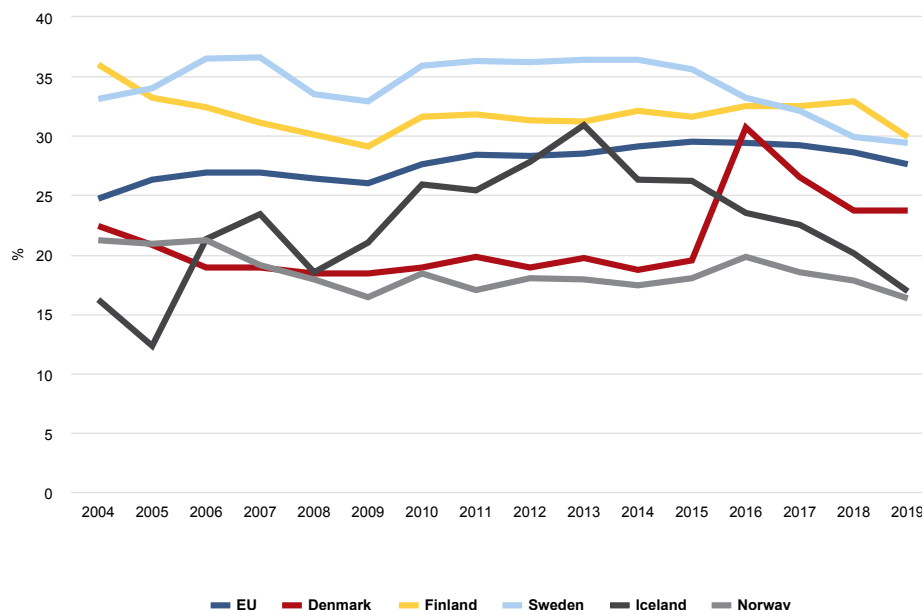


Figure 6.3 Temporary employees as a percentage of the total number of employees in the 20 to 29 years age group

Source: Eurostat (ec.europa.eu/Eurostat)

Note: Denmark: break in the timeseries in 2016



Photo: Unsplash

7. LEISURE AND CULTURE

Leisure time is very important for young people. Young people's leisure activities can afford them useful opportunities to participate in the democratic aspects of society, as well as improving their health.

7.1 Physical activities

The benefits of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) for enhancing the physical, mental, and social health of adolescents, plus their academic achievements, is well documented. The figure below indicates the proportion of young people who report completing at least 60 minutes of MVPA daily.

This proportion varies a great deal across the Nordic countries, both above and below the HBSC average. Boys report a higher rate of physical activity than girls across all Nordic countries and Greenland. Girls in Denmark demonstrate the lowest proportion, with just 7%.

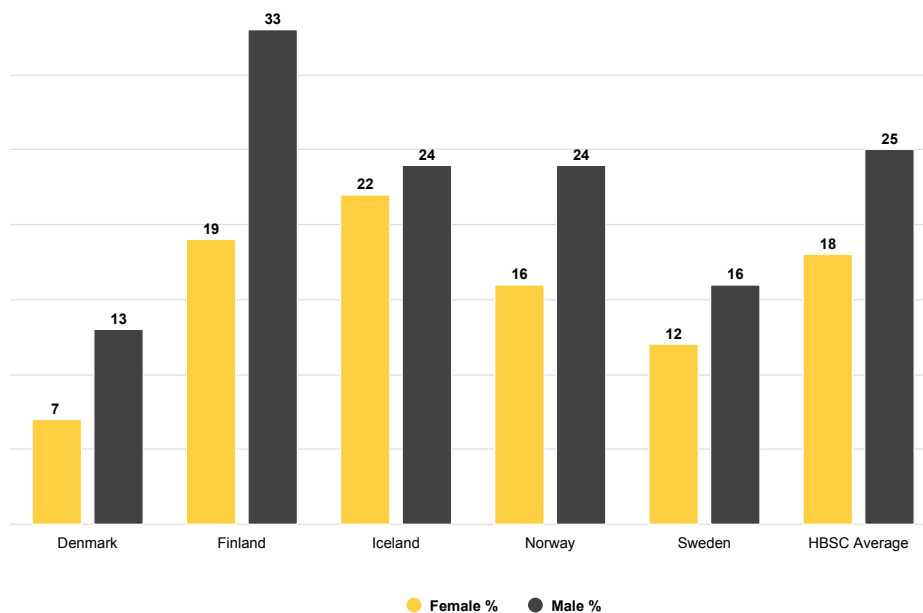


Figure 7.1 Proportion of boys and girls aged 15 years reporting at least one hour of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily, 2018

Source: WHO – The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children
(<http://www.hbsc.org/>)

7.2 Spending time with friends online

The figure below shows how often young people had online contact with friends and acquaintances. Findings show that the proportion of 11-year-olds who are intensive users (almost all the time) of electronic media tend to contact friends in two of the friendship categories: 'close friends' and 'friends met online'. A general pattern is that boys are in communication more intensely with friends online than girls are. The only exception is Finland. When it comes to communicating with close friends, the female ratio there is higher than the male one.

7.2 Proportion of young people aged 11 years having intensive electronic communication with friends, 2018

Source: WHO – The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children
(<http://www.hbsc.org/>)

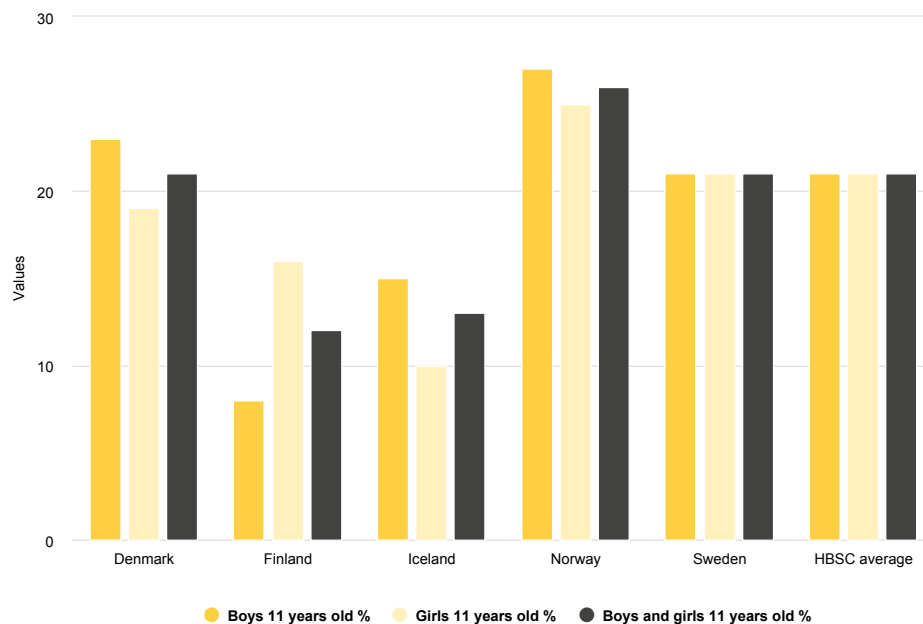


Figure 7.2.a Intensive electronic communication with close friends

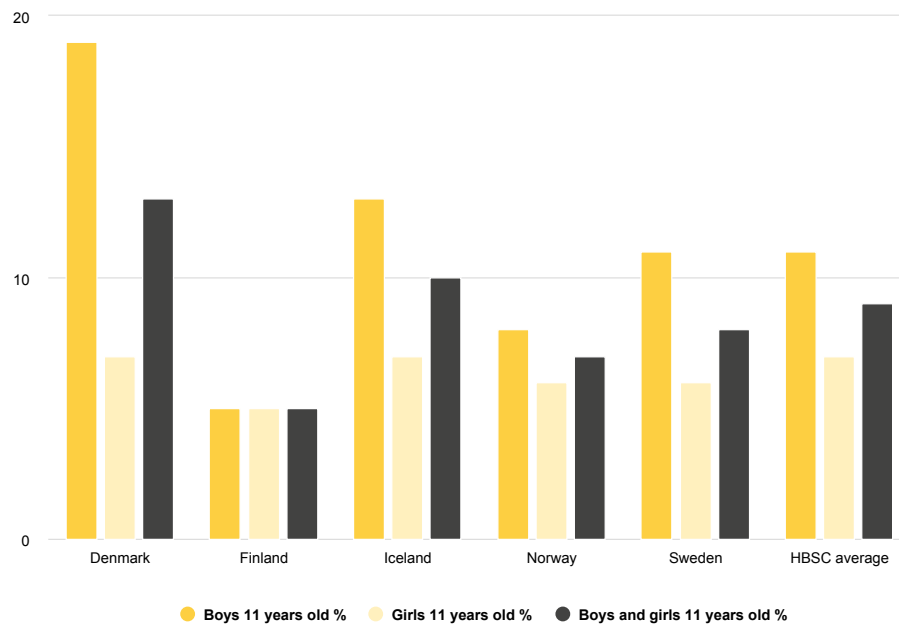


Figure 7.2.b. Intensive electronic communication with friends met online

7.3 Recreational screen time

Young people were asked how many hours a day of their free time they usually spend watching television, videos (including YouTube or similar services), DVDs and other screen entertainments on weekdays. In Denmark and Sweden, young people spend more time watching television compared to the HBSC average, whereas in Iceland and Finland 15-year-olds are somewhat below that level.

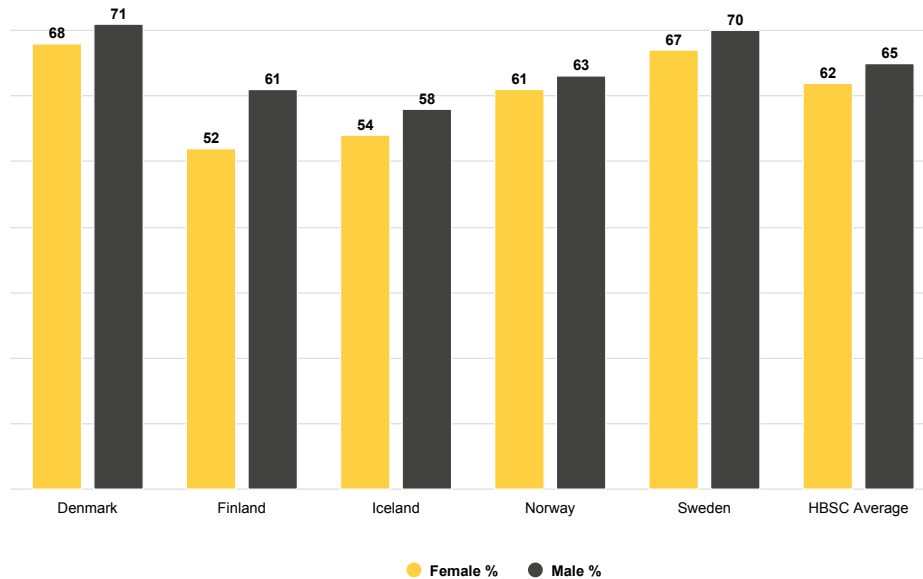


Figure 7.3 Percentage of boys and girls aged 15 years watching television (or online streaming platforms) for two or more hours on weekdays, 2018

Source: WHO – Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (www.hbsc.org/).

About this publication

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Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

Nordic co-operation has firm traditions in politics, economics and culture and plays an important role in European and international forums. The Nordic community strives for a strong Nordic Region in a strong Europe.

Nordic co-operation promotes regional interests and values in a global world. The values shared by the Nordic countries help make the region one of the most innovative and competitive in the world.

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