



Summary

Date: 2021-09-27

Reference number: 3.1.1-2020-0218

RiR 2021:26

Central government suicide prevention work – effective interaction?

Summary

The Swedish National Audit Office (Swedish NAO) has audited central government suicide prevention work. The audit covers government governance and agencies' interaction, national knowledge support, support for the implementation of knowledge and national follow-up of suicide prevention. The Swedish NAO's overall assessment is that the work by central government on suicide prevention has not been sufficiently effective. The Riksdag decided on an overall vision for suicide prevention and a national action programme in 2008, but only in 2020 did the Government take several initiatives to strengthen suicide prevention work.

Audit findings

The remit of the Public Health Agency of Sweden to coordinate suicide prevention work at national level has contributed to highlighting the importance of suicide prevention work. At the same time, however, the audit shows that the suicide prevention work at regional and local level varies in scale and is least developed in the municipalities.

There are problems with central government knowledge management when it is to lead to concrete measures. The Public Health Agency of Sweden has difficulties in influencing the work of the regions and municipalities using the knowledge base, which is not binding. The audit shows that when officials from different

agencies work together, their priorities vary and they have different, often limited opportunities, to gain support for suicide prevention work in their own organisation. It is difficult to determine how much of central government suicide prevention work influences the work of the regions and municipalities and how much depends on their own abilities, priorities and capacity to receive support. We have also seen problems in a municipality that has established working practices and developed suicide prevention work. Emergency services call for clearer constitutional support for suicide prevention. Furthermore, information sharing does not work between services that recurrently meet people in acute situations with a threat of suicide.

There are a number of areas that can be developed to achieve better results at regional and municipal level. Support for the implementation of knowledge needs to be improved so that it can contribute to suicide prevention efforts. The Public Health Agency of Sweden and the National Board of Health and Welfare are to support regions and municipalities in their work with mental health and suicide prevention. As regards knowledge support, this is perceived as difficult to navigate and not adapted to their own activities. The problem is due not only to the design of the support, but also to the lack of capacity to receive support in the organisations themselves. A clear result of the audit is that suicide prevention work is largely person-dependent and thus vulnerable. This is a problem for all actors involved in suicide prevention.

The audit shows that actors and agencies have different starting points in terms of legislation and remits and sometimes also different views on suicide and thus suicide prevention work. This places demands on the Government's ability to govern effectively. In addition, in order to strengthen suicide prevention work, more agencies need to be involved in the work.

The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) is responsible for coordinating and supporting the country's emergency services, which in many municipalities have an operational role in suicide events. However, the Agency does not deal with issues related to suicide and suicide prevention and does not participate in the national strategy work. At the same time, emergency services can work on both issues locally. The audit also shows that incidents related to suicide threats are handled differently throughout the country. In addition, there is no uniform national handling of incoming calls related to suicide threats via 112. The Swedish Transport Administration has had a self-initiated target of halving the number of fatalities on state railways, where most of the accidents are suicide. The work has not led to any reduction in the number of fatalities, nor has the agency followed up the target to find out why the measures have not had any effect. At the same time, the Government has formulated a new target to cut fatalities by half by 2030.

Schools are also important organisations in working preventively with mental illness. But school authorities do not have a remit in suicide prevention.

The audit shows that the results of the suicide prevention work cannot be followed up. This is partly because the national action programme drawn up in 2006 lacks operationalised and measurable targets and indicators. It was not until 2020 that the Government initiated a new strategy to revise the programme. Two examples of areas that according to the Swedish NAO should be included and developed in the new action programme are substance abuse and addiction issues and support for relatives.

Follow-up of suicide events in care services is another important part of prevention. The follow-up that has been carried out reveals many and recurrent shortcomings that are not followed up and addressed in the organisations concerned. The Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO) has an important supervisory task but has so far not reviewed the handling of suicide cases at an aggregated level. At the same time, the number of reports of suicide events to IVO has decreased since the requirement for care providers to report suicide in accordance with Lex Maria was removed in 2017.

Recommendations

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Government:

- Initiate uniform national handling of incoming calls related to the threat of suicide via 112 in order to facilitate emergency response decisions by emergency services.
- Ensure that the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) is involved in the national suicide prevention work, both in the upcoming strategy work and as a supporting agency for municipal emergency services.
- Ensure that the Swedish Transport Administration follows up and evaluates its efforts to achieve the target of halving fatalities on state railways. The purpose of the follow-up should be to find out why the interventions have not had any effect. The Government should also ensure that the Swedish Transport Administration makes measures taken more systematic.

The Swedish National Audit Office makes the following recommendations to the Public Health Agency of Sweden and the National Board of Health and Welfare:

- Ensure that the upcoming strategy on mental health and suicide prevention is developed so that it becomes governing and relevant to the work. This can be achieved by placing greater emphasis on the following elements:
 - Include and develop areas that have a bearing on suicide prevention work. Two examples of areas that should be included and developed are substance abuse and addiction issues and support for relatives.
 - Ensure that the areas also include measures that can be followed up with relevant indicators in order to develop systematic learning in the field.
 - Develop guidance on the priorities of measures in the field of suicide prevention based on the well-founded knowledge available. It is particularly important for some twenty agencies to work together on a new strategy.
- Improve support for the implementation of knowledge in suicide prevention. One way to contribute to better support for implementation is to ensure that knowledge support is specific, useful and accessible to organisations working with suicide prevention.

The Swedish National Audit Office makes the following recommendation to the Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO):

- Follow up suicide events in care services on an aggregated level in order to contribute to the patient safety work of care providers and thereby increase learning. This is particularly true in view of the risk of increased mental illness when the pandemic is over.