

School pupils' attitudes in Sweden:

Minorities, bullying, threats, and violence

Forum
för levande
historia

Report author: Oscar Österberg

Summary

This is a study of Swedish teenagers' attitudes towards a number of social groups and the way they view their own vulnerability to bullying, threats, and violence. The study, conducted in 2024–5, focuses on pupils' attitudes towards seven minority groups:

- immigrants
- Afro-Swedes/Black people
- Jews
- Muslims
- Roma
- Sami
- lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people

The study also draws comparisons with two earlier Living History Forum pupil surveys in 2003 and 2013.

To measure pupils' intolerance of minority groups they were asked to respond to a range of questions and statements. Some statements were identical for all groups, while others only concerned a specific group. Pupils' responses to a selection of the statements have been combined to measure their attitudes.

Statements about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people were included in the 2013 survey, so for the purposes of comparison the same statements were used in the 2024–5 survey. It is for that reason this report uses the older term LGBT rather than the more recent LGBTQI+.

The 2024–5 survey was conducted by Statistics Sweden on behalf of the Living History Forum, under the framework of a government-commissioned study. It covers a total of 8,127 pupils, of whom 1,139 were in Year 9 of compulsory school and 6,978 were in Years 1–3 of upper secondary school.

The survey's key findings are as follows.

Generally positive attitudes but negative trends

A key finding is that pupils generally display high levels of tolerance: 72 per cent say they respect other people's beliefs and opinions, that they think it is important that people are free to live how they want, and that society benefits from having diverse traditions and lifestyles. Most pupils also display a positive or at least neutral attitude towards the

seven minority groups in question. Against that, depending on the minority group, 3–15 per cent of pupils express a deeply intolerant attitude.

There are negative trends. The Living History Forum's earlier surveys found that pupils in Sweden displayed increasingly positive attitudes towards various groups, but this trend now seems to have stalled. Compared to the Living History Forum's pupil survey in 2013, there has been a rise not only in the proportion of pupils who report being subjected to bullying, threats and violence, but also the proportion with negative attitudes towards the minority groups in question.

Almost across the board, the proportion of pupils who agree with negative statements about the minority groups included in the survey has increased compared to 2013, while the proportion who agree with positive statements has fallen.

Pupils' attitudes towards the various groups included in the survey tend to be interrelated. Pupils who display negative attitudes towards one group are also likely to display negative attitudes towards other groups.

Negative attitudes towards LGBT people have increased most

The biggest change is in attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. In the 2013 survey, they were the category of people towards whom pupils displayed the most positive attitudes. In the 2024–5 survey, they are instead the category towards whom pupils display the most negative attitudes.

Girls more tolerant than boys

One consistent finding is a significant gender difference: girls generally express more positive attitudes than boys. The correlation is strongest when measuring attitudes towards LGBT people.

Differences in attitudes between the sexes were noted in earlier Living History Forum pupil surveys, but the current survey indicates that the differences have grown slightly.

Pupils display a more positive attitude as they get older

There is a weak correlation between pupils' year groups and the various measures of their attitudes, but it should be noted that the older the year group the (slightly) more positive pupils are towards the minority groups in question. This trend has also been observed in earlier surveys.

Upper secondary school programme matters

Pupils' choice of programme at upper secondary school has also been shown to have a significant impact on levels of negative attitudes. Pupils who take academic programmes consistently display lower levels of negative attitudes than pupils in vocational programmes – something also noted in earlier studies.

A new finding from this study is that the difference in attitudes seems to predate pupils starting upper secondary school. Of pupils in the final year of compulsory school, those planning to apply for academic programmes are less negative towards the seven minority groups than those planning to apply for vocational programmes.

* The 2024–5 survey used the same statements about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people as in the 2013 survey. For that reason, this report uses the older term LGBT rather than the more recent LGBTQI+.

Pupils with degree-educated parents have a more positive attitude

Earlier pupil surveys showed that the higher the parents' education level, the more positive the pupils' attitudes towards minority groups. In the 2024–5 survey, the findings are largely the same. There is also a correlation between political discussions in the family and more positive attitudes towards Afro-Swedes/Black people, Jews, Sami, and LGBT people. The correlation is less strong for attitudes towards immigrants, Muslims, and Roma.

Background, religion, and friendships are important

Earlier pupil surveys found that attitudes differ according to whether pupils have Swedish or foreign backgrounds. The 2024–5 survey similarly reveals the differences connected to background. Pupils with a Swedish background display a more negative attitude towards Muslims in the survey, compared to pupils with a foreign background. Pupils with a foreign background display a more negative attitude towards LGBT people, Jews and Sami people compared to pupils with a Swedish background.

Pupils who do not identify with any religion, on the other hand, display more positive attitudes towards LGBT people, Jews, Roma, and Sami than those who say they belong to a religion.

Pupils who said they have one or more friends in one of the seven minority groups also tend to have a more positive attitude towards that group than pupils who do not have friends in the group in question. The correlation is strongest for attitudes towards LGBT people.

An interest in politics correlates with both negative and positive attitudes

In the 2013 survey, pupils who were not interested in politics were more negative towards the minority groups than pupils who were interested in politics. By contrast, attitudes towards immigrants, Muslims, Roma, and LGBT people in the 2024–5 survey form a bimodal distribution with a U-shaped dip in the middle. Generally, pupils who are very interested in politics and those who have no interest in politics both display a more negative attitude towards those groups than other pupils do. When it comes to attitudes towards Jews and Sami, however, the pattern is the same as in 2013: pupils with a greater interest in politics display more positive attitudes towards Jews and Sami than those who are not interested in politics.

Pupils dissatisfied with democracy have a more negative attitude

Another important factor is how satisfied pupils are with the way democracy operates in Sweden. The more dissatisfied they are with democracy, the more negative their attitude towards the seven minority groups. This was also found in the 2013 survey.

Attitudes are connected to worry about the future

There is a relatively strong correlation between worry about future immigration growth and a more negative attitude about immigrants and Muslims. There is also a distinct, weaker correlation between worry about rising immigration and negative attitudes towards the other groups in the survey.

Lack of trust in people and institutions correlates with negative attitudes

As in the 2013 survey, there is also a correlation between negative attitudes towards the seven minority groups and a lack of trust in other people and in institutions such as school, the police, and politicians. This correlation is strongest when it comes to pupils' attitudes towards LGBT people and Jews.

Pupils who trust others have a more positive attitude

As in the 2013 survey, there is a correlation between pupils' trust in other people and how negative their attitudes are. The more trust pupils have in other people, the more likely they are to express positive attitudes towards the groups concerned.

Pupils with negative attitudes trust social media more

There is also a weak correlation between trusting information from TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat and a higher level of negative attitudes towards the seven minority groups in the survey. The strongest correlation is with attitudes towards Jews.

Conspiratorial thinking goes with a more negative attitude

In recent years, there has been increasing research interest in the negative impact of conspiracy theories on public debate and people's trust in society. The 2024–5 survey therefore included questions to measure conspiratorial thinking – people's psychological tendency to view the world in conspiratorial terms and to believe various conspiracy theories.

The 2024–5 survey's findings indicate there is a correlation between negative attitudes towards the seven minority groups and a higher level of conspiratorial thinking. The correlation is strongest in pupils' attitudes towards Jews. There is also a clear correlation between the level of conspiratorial thinking and how pupils respond to a statement about 'Jewish' influence in the world.

Perceived vulnerability correlates with negative attitudes

The survey shows that pupils who do not have anyone to turn to for help or support, or do not know if they have anyone to turn to, display a more negative attitude towards the minority groups compared to other pupils. The more help pupils feel they have, the more the likelihood of negative attitudes decreases.

School is important for pupils' attitudes

The pupil surveys consistently find that school is an important arena when it comes to negative attitudes. The 2024–5 findings show that pupils who attend schools in or near cities and towns tend to have a more positive attitude towards the minority groups in question, compared with those who go to school in smaller towns or rural areas. Pupils who attend schools in areas with significant and very significant socioeconomic challenges or in mixed-income areas also tend to display a more negative attitude than pupils whose schools are located in areas with good or very good socioeconomic status.

Positive attitudes among pupils who like school

The 2013 survey indicated that pupils in schools with a higher proportion of qualified teachers tend to display more positive attitudes towards minority groups, and that pupils who like school have a more positive attitude towards minority groups. The correlation with the proportion of qualified teachers is less clear in the 2024–5 survey, but there is a more positive attitude towards minority groups in classes where pupils are satisfied with school than in classes where pupils are less satisfied with school.

For upper secondary schools, the survey also reveals a weak correlation between higher average final grades and a less negative attitude towards the minority groups. The strongest correlation is for attitudes towards Jews.

Pupils with positive attitudes towards minorities are generally more tolerant

The survey shows there is a relatively strong correlation between positive attitudes towards the seven minority groups on the one hand and a generally tolerant, open attitude towards other people and a greater appreciation of open society on the other. This finding, which does not relate directly to individual groups but to society as a whole, is new to the 2024–5 survey. Attitudes differ between the various types of pupils: girls tend to be more tolerant and open than boys; older pupils are more tolerant than younger ones; and pupils in academic programmes are more tolerant than pupils in vocational programmes.

As with the other attitude measures, there are also differences that correlate with the parents' educational level. A larger proportion of pupils with degree-educated parents display a more tole-

rant, open attitude than other pupils do. Further, the more satisfied pupils are with democracy in Sweden, the more they are inclined to express a tolerant attitude towards other people. Finally, there is also a clear correlation between greater trust in other people and a more tolerant, open attitude towards them.

Increased exposure to bullying, threats and violence

In terms of exposure to bullying, threats and violence, the level is higher in the 2024–5 survey than in the 2013 survey. The proportion of pupils who say they have been verbally bullied has increased significantly from 33 per cent in 2013 to 51 per cent in 2024–5. The proportion who have been threatened has increased from 8 per cent to 13 per cent, and the proportion who said that they have been physically bullied has increased from 11 per cent in 2013 to 16 per cent in 2024–5.

Girls report being verbally bullied to a greater extent than boys, while boys report they are at greater risk of physical violence. Younger pupils tend to be more exposed than older pupils to bullying, threats, and violence.

In the 2024–5 survey, pupils who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual report being exposed to bullying, threats, and violence to a greater extent than heterosexual pupils. Unlike heterosexual pupils, the lesbian, gay, or bisexual pupils are more likely to report that they have been exposed to cyberbullying that they associate with their sexual orientation.

Foreign-born pupils and Swedish-born pupils with two foreign-born parents are marginally less likely than other pupils to respond that they have been bullied or threatened; however, foreign-born pupils or Swedish-born pupils with at least one foreign-born parent are significantly more likely

to respond that they have been bullied about their background, compared to Swedish-born pupils with two Swedish-born parents. That said, the likelihood of being bullied about one's background varies according to the type of socioeconomic area where the school is. The findings also indicate that pupils born in Sweden with two parents who were also born in Sweden are less likely to be subject to cyberbullying about their background.

