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The Labour-Market Attachment and Well-Being of Immigrants in Sparsely Populated Regions of Finland

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Abstract

Our research aimed to explore community well-being and individual well-being of immigrants with a special view to economic integration. We are applying objective and subjective variables for well-being at both community and individual level in the counties, which represent regions outside the “growth centres” of Finland and are experiencing a decrease in population: Kymenlaakso, North Savo, and Kainuu. The study, utilising data from Statistics Finland and the country’s Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, revealed that immigrants’ economic status and experiences at work and in their living area are important factors in the well-being of the community and individuals alike, as judged objectively and subjectively. These can get reflected in the level of community belongingness or lack of it. Feeling engaged with the region is a continuous process that affects interaction between individuals and their community.

Keywords: *immigrants, labour market, integration, well-being, counties.*

Introduction

Finland has one of Western Europe’s most rural population balances. The “rural question” has always been at the top of the state agenda; the central problems related to Finland’s rural policy are ageing and declining population, as well as a decrease in the number of jobs and services available. People’s concentration in the national growth centres is related to the ongoing transformation of Finland’s economic structure, a process that started later than in many other countries. Rapid change in the occupation landscape and the associated process of urbanisation led to migration directed away from the countryside toward cities. This trend manifested itself also in much of the population retreating toward southern and south-western Finland (Heikkilä, 2003).

In both national and international research literature, health, economic livelihood, work, education, housing, security, and social relations have been listed as core objective dimensions of welfare (e.g., Berger and Emmerling, 2020; Barr, 2020; Pehkonen, 2018; Toikko and Pehkonen, 2018). Paid work, in addition to maintaining economic well-being, has latent effects: it helps with time management, taking part in regular activities, and processing one’s social status and identity, while also bringing social contacts and conveying a sense of influence on the collective whole. It is important to recognise the difference between being classified as unemployed and experiencing the consequences of

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unemployment. An individual's health problems may lead to unemployment (see Dunlavy and Gauffin, 2020), and, sometimes in a feedback loop, unemployment may lead to health problems. One's social well-being problems and lack of labour-market attachment may express themselves especially in psychological ill-being. Furthermore, barriers to (re)entering the labour market may arise, some connected with employers' attitudes to recruiting immigrants and to discrimination (Ahmad, 2005).

In this study, our main research question is: what are the community well-being and individual well-being like for immigrants by economic indicators in the sparsely populated regions of Finland. Further on, are there any differences between researched sparsely populated regions, and what is their holding power to have immigrants settled in their regions. Finally, we assess the used data to analyse immigrants' well-being.

The indicators analysed are related to labour-market attachment – for example, immigrants' inclusion in or exclusion from the labour market, their overeducation in the context of their current job, and experiences of discrimination at work. We look at two facets of well-being. The first construct is objective well-being, referring to a set of societal circumstances captured by material, tangible and quantitative indicators (Lee et al., 2021).

The second is subjective well-being, which refers to people's own reporting on aspects of their life (see Aminzadeh et al., 2020). There are studies on health and economic circumstances that affect subjective well-being (Barr, 2020; Berger and Emmerling, 2020). But also, other aspects of life have importance, e.g., having good relationships, and being connected to community (Castaneda and Kuusio, 2019; Karhula et al., 2020; Toikko and Pehkonen, 2018). It is also important to consider the well-being of groups of people, such as organizations and communities.

The study regions consist of the Finnish counties of Kymenlaakso, North Savo and Kainuu. These represent regions that do not feature national growth centres as defined in Finland. They thus represent the wider concept of "sparsely populated regions". Naturally the counties' major centres, towns, and built-up areas are not sparsely populated. We use, however, in this research as a regional concept the county level. An influx of labour from outside these counties is necessary for guaranteeing the region's sustainable population and economic development. In geographical terms, they represent the south-eastern part of Finland (Kymenlaakso), central Finland (North Savo), and northern Finland (Kainuu).

Several factors render this research quite topical. 1) Because of a low birth rate and an ageing population, the role and importance of labour migration is expected to grow. This is a highly significant aspect of the Finnish economy (Helander, 2011; Stenborg et al., 2021). 2) Most immigrants in Finland have settled in the largest urban areas, and the phenomenon of such people's concentration in neighbourhoods where other members of their ethnic group are based is not new (Kyhä, 2011; Heleniak, 2020). 3) At the same time, some immigrants do live outside the nation's growth centres (Heikkilä, 2012; Martin, Mäntylä and Pakkanen, 2013). 4) Wherever they reside, however, their labour-market attachment, well-being, and communality are under-researched. 5) Finally, policymakers need new knowledge of the cluster of pertinent phenomena (Pitkänen, Mayer and Valtakari, 2022).

The study's background and theoretical approach

Already in the 1970s, sociologist Erik Allardt (1976) showed that having, loving, and being are keywords for central necessary conditions of human development and existence. There are both material and non-material basic human needs to have. Both types of need have to be considered in indicator systems designed to gauge the actual level of welfare in a society. It covers the needs for nutrition, environment, air and water and the material conditions, for example, economic resources, employment and

education. Loving means the need to relate to other people and to form social identities, for example attachments to family, kin, friends, and contacts in the local community. Being stands for the need for integration into the society, and to live in harmony with the nature.

Numerous economic, social, and psychological variables moderate the relationship between social situation and well-being (Abel and Frohlich, 2012; Buttler et al., 2016; Thoits, 2011; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Community subjective well-being encompasses, for example, neighbourhoods, cities, families, workplaces, schools, and religious communities (Lee and Kim, 2016; VanderWeele, 2021). A sense of belonging, social interaction, and positive forms of caring are central components of welfare (as depicted in Figure 1). Lee and Kim (2016) suggested that the following elements form the heart of a multidimensional understanding of subjective well-being in a community: firstly, individuals perceive themselves as valued and respected, such that they can flourish. Secondly, the individual is given a chance to anchor the subjective feeling: in educational referent groups (including schools, peer groups of various sorts, those in one's classroom, or an entire campus community) and opportunities to participate in political activities. Thirdly, both physical and social environments, with the associated economics and culture, contribute to the community's subjective well-being. Community-level subjective well-being can be viewed as an individual's sense of belonging and engagement in the community. A lack of it can manifest itself as a factor pushing toward out-migration.

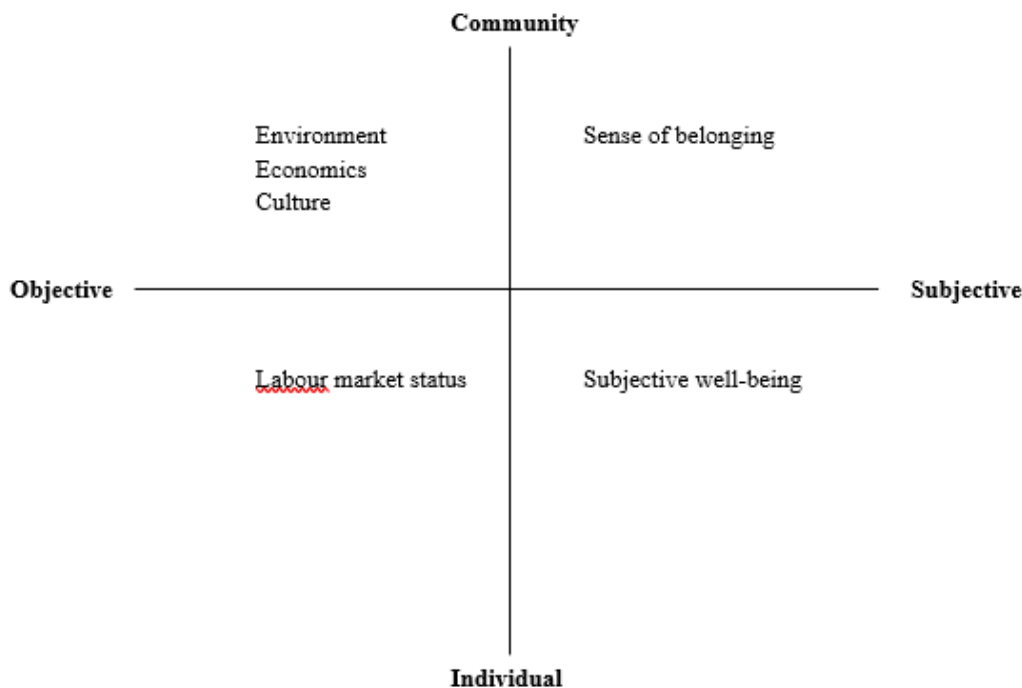


Figure 1. A map of quadrants from the communal–individual, and objective–subjective dimensions of measuring well-being (modified from work by Lee and Kim, 2016).

Scholars have reported that community belongingness exerts a buffering effect against factors detrimental to well-being. In the process of buffering, a social resource reduces the impact of life stress on subjective well-being; in this case, persons with a strong sense of belonging show less adverse impacts from negative events. For instance, Hombrados-Mendieta et al. (2013) confirmed that community belongingness acts as a moderating variable buffering the effect of the adaptation process experienced by immigrants (cf. Berry and Hou, 2017; Pehkonen, 2017). At the same time, well-being on the part of individuals also seems to protect them against the negative effects of unemployment.

Binder and Coad (2015) noted that individuals with greater well-being suffered less when becoming unemployed.

The data and methods

As our main research question focuses in what are the community well-being and individual well-being like for immigrants by economic indicators in the sparsely populated regions of Kymenlaakso, North Savo and Kainuu in Finland, we have used to our study official statistical data to illuminate these phenomena. Our data is also showing if there any differences between these regions and what is their holding power to have immigrants settled in their regions.

The study data consists, more closely, of official statistics of Statistics Finland (Statistics Finland 2021). Firstly, we were interested in the data consisting of population development and forecasts, migration, and unemployment rate in the study counties of Kymenlaakso, North Savo and Kainuu. These all illuminate essential demographic processes occurring in these counties.

Secondly, we used data of economic integration of immigrants from the Integration Indicators Database of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (2021). It is a rich and exceptional database to study regional economic integration of immigrants. Several variables are by years that immigrants were living in Finland, for example, immigrants' long-term unemployment rate, and share of part-time employees among wage and salary earners. Variables of immigrants' well-being at work are included in this database covering immigrants' overeducation in the context of their current job and experiences of discrimination at work.

The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland gathers information from various sources for a countrywide monitoring system covering integration, in its various aspects, and ethnic relations. Theme-linked indicators form the basis for the monitoring system, with the main sources of the material in the Integration Indicators Database being Statistics Finland's registers and the FinMonik survey conducted by the National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) in 2018–2019. Of this data, we used integration indicators connected to economic integration.

In the ministry's data, so-called PxWeb statistical databases contain statistical material and variables in table format from which the user can select detailed variables he/she needs to make the calculations. After that he/she can generate the modified tables or produce graphics (Statistics Finland, 2022).

The study as its nature is a quantitative one as the data covers statistics and database material. According to Watson (2015), quantitative studies produce numbers that are interpreted before conclusions are drawn. The data can be analysed using some form of electronic database. Of the quantitative research, we have used descriptive research approach. The descriptive research approach is a basic research method that examines the situation, as it exists in its current state (Williams, 2007). For describing the research material, we have used basic statistical technique, i.e., cross-tabulations from the used statistics and database. We selected from them variables that explain and give deep understanding of immigrants' economic integration and well-being in the labour market. All used variables and their content are explained in detail in the empirical analysis section.

The demographic development of Kymenlaakso, North Savo, and Kainuu

Population development was negative in Kymenlaakso, North Savo, and Kainuu in 1990–2018 and is forecasted to continue its downward trend until at least 2040 (Figure 2). The 2019–2040 decline in population numbers is projected to be the most pronounced in Kymenlaakso (-26,466 residents), with Kainuu showing the sharpest decline in relative terms, 17%, over that time.

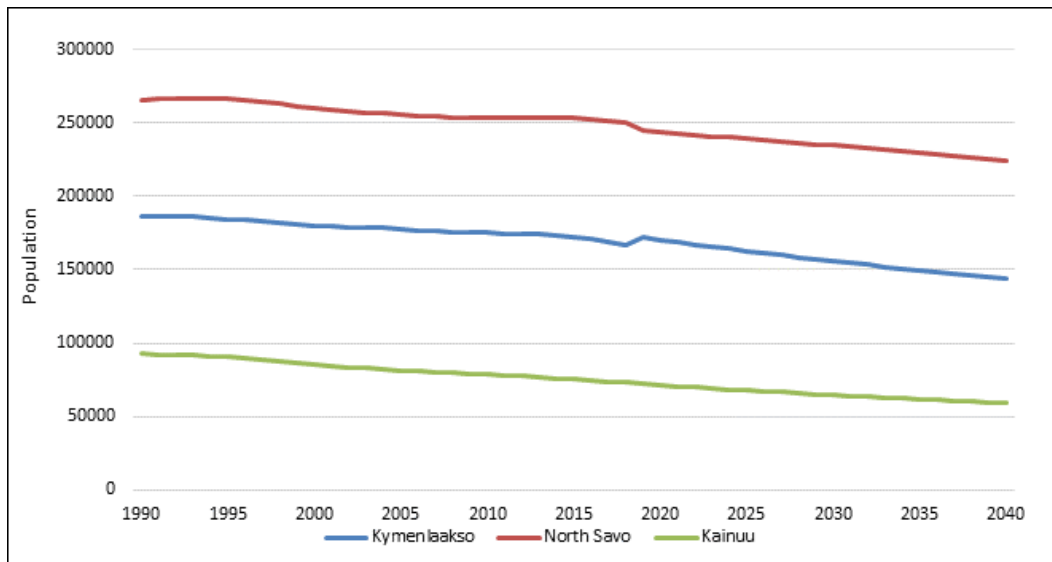


Figure 2. The 1990–2040 population development and forecast for Kymenlaakso, North Savo, and Kainuu (Data: Statistics Finland).

In inter-county movement, net migration (the balance of in- and out-migration) by persons of Finnish and foreign background was negative in all counties surveyed in 2019 (Table 1). This is evidence that the counties' so-called holding power has been insufficient for every resident to continue living in Kymenlaakso, North Savo, or Kainuu: more have moved away than migrated to these areas as new residents. In 2019, the tendency of people with a foreign background to out-migrate when moving between counties was greater for Kainuu percentage (9.4%) than Kymenlaakso (6.9%) or North Savo (6.1%), while the corresponding percentage for loss of people with a foreign background was the highest in Kainuu, at 4.6% of its total foreign-background population. The equivalent figure for Kymenlaakso was 3.4% and for North Savo 1.7%. Out-migration by people of Finnish background has accounted for about 3% of their numbers in several counties, with overall loss of these persons to other counties being below 1% (0.2–0.6%). Hence, the figures clearly show that foreign-background people were more likely to move between counties than those with a Finnish background.

Table 1. Inter-county migration of Finnish- and foreign-background persons with regard to Kymenlaakso, North Savo, and Kainuu in 2019 (Data: Statistics Finland).

County	Foreign-origin			Finnish-origin		
	In-migration	Out-migration	Net migration	In-migration	Out-migration	Net-migration
Kymenlaakso	355	710	-355	3 274	4 211	-937
North Savo	342	476	-134	6 275	6 657	-382
Kainuu	102	202	-100	1 815	2 177	-362

Immigrants' integration as judged by economic integration indicators

In the next stage of analysis, we examined the integration of immigrants in Kymenlaakso, North Savo, and Kainuu by using selective indicators connected to economic integration that reveal what kinds of similarities and differences exist across the three counties.

The first indicator we considered is unemployment rate. Examining the statistics for 1995 to 2018 revealed that the unemployment rate (as a percentage of the labour force) in the three counties among people born abroad with a foreign background was markedly higher than that for people with either Finnish or foreign background who were born in Finland (Figure 3). Of the counties studied, Kainuu has long had the highest unemployment rate, which reached 62% in 1996 among foreign-born people but was high also among Finnish-born people. That year's unemployment rates were high for Kymenlaakso (49%)

and North Savo (46%) too. However, Finland started to recover from the deep economic depression of the early 1990s as the second half of the decade unfolded. This development was visible in declining unemployment rates among all groups. Then, the world financial crisis in the late 2000s propelled unemployment levels to a new level among the foreign-born, especially in Kymenlaakso and Kainuu of the study counties, while Finnish-born people in these counties saw a lesser effect (Fix et al., 2009; Heikkilä, 2017). These figures are a sign that the economic crisis hits first-generation immigrants especially hard. In more recent years, Kymenlaakso's unemployment rate for foreign-born people has been higher than Kainuu's and North Savo's figures. Although unemployment has declined among both population groups in the longer term, a noteworthy difference between the two groups remains in Kainuu, Kymenlaakso, and North Savo.

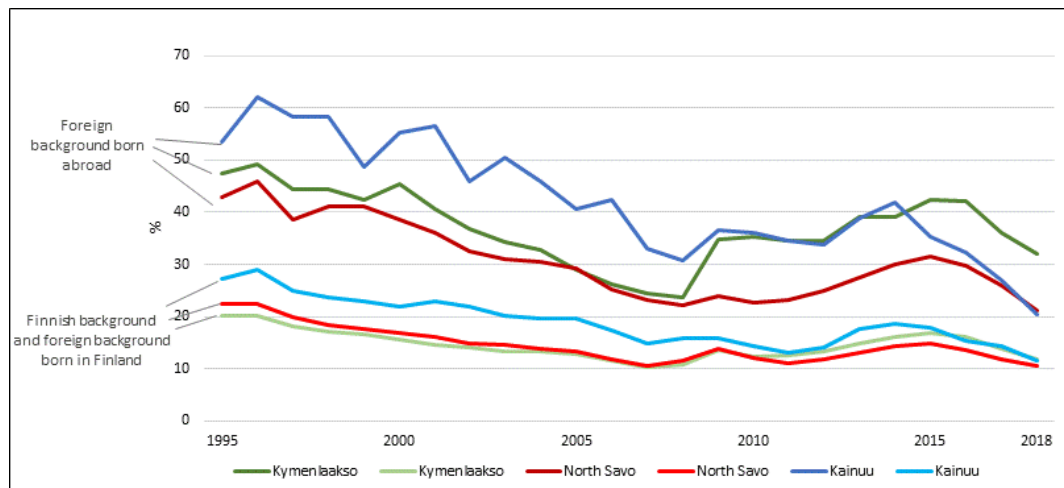


Figure 3. Unemployment rate for people of foreign background born abroad and among Finnish- and foreign background people born in Finland in Kymenlaakso, North Savo and Kainuu in 1995–2018 (Data: Statistics Finland).

Table 2 paints a more detailed picture of the full set of indicators for the integration of foreign-born people with a foreign background in Kymenlaakso, North Savo, and Kainuu in 2018–2019. This analysis is based on the special data from the Integration Indicators Database. The first indicator we looked at for this data source is long-term unemployment, where the ministry defines a long-term-unemployed person as a person who has been continuously unemployed for 12 months or longer. Surprisingly, the figure for long-term employment in the study counties and also in Finland as a whole was highest among those who had been living in Finland for at least 10 years in 2018. In North Savo, it was high also for those who had been in Finland for 5–9 years. The numbers do not tell us about, for example, who the long-term unemployed are: are they people whose skills in the official languages of Finland (Finnish and Swedish) proved insufficient to afford a better employment situation, people of a particular educational background or seeking work in a certain economic sector, etc. Still, the data yield some information, and various possible explanations for challenges in entering and staying in the labour market are discussed by Heikkilä (2021).

Part-time work is another interesting indicator in analysis of the years lived in the study counties. A part-time worker is an employee whose contractual regular weekly working time is less than 90% of the time typical for the economic sector in question. The highest percentage of wage- and salary-earners who are part-time employees was found in Kainuu among those foreign-born people with foreign background who have lived in Finland for up to four years (59%). This share was almost double that of Kymenlaakso (29%) and of North Savo (32%) for this population group. For Finland as a whole the

share was 30%. The more years lived in Finland, the lower the proportion of part-time employees. One possible explanation is that the shorter people's time in Finland, the less they are integrated into the society in the counties studied. It takes time to build a social network and learn a new language, for example. In addition, one's stage in life can influence how available a newcomer is for taking an active role in the labour market. Since part-time work is a suitable solution in some cases, this indicator may be seen in a positive light, but it could be viewed negatively too, if the person is willing to work full-time as usually is the case.

The indicator employed persons' at-risk-of-poverty rate in 2018 represents persons living in low-income household-dwelling units as a percentage of the entire population of residents. Those household-dwelling units for which the equivalent income is below 60% of the corresponding median income of all household-dwelling units are considered low-income households. When this indicator is examined with regard to years lived in Finland, those people born abroad with foreign background who had been in Finland for up to four years were at risk of poverty in the case of nearly a quarter of the employed persons in North Savo. The figure was less than one fifth for Kymenlaakso and Kainuu. The longer people have lived in Finland, the lower the percentage of those who are at risk of poverty. This positive temporal development is visible for all three counties; i.e., among those who have lived 10 years or more in Finland, roughly a tenth of employed persons faced a risk of poverty in 2018. The same applied also for Finland as a whole. That said, Kymenlaakso displayed a high at-risk-of-poverty rate also for those residing in Finland for 5–9 years.

Percentage of population in low-employment household-dwelling units in 2018 is defined as persons living in household-dwelling units where the adults work at below 20% of their full potential in terms of working hours over the course of the year. This figure was nearly one third in Kymenlaakso, while in Kainuu and North Savo it was one fourth, and almost the same in Finland as a whole.

Experience of discrimination at work in 2018 denotes the proportion of respondents indicating that, in the last five years, they have experienced unequal treatment or discrimination in their current job (in a recruitment or appointment situation) or in attitudes of colleagues or supervisors. The share varied between 27% and 30% in the study counties, which indicates the existence of job discrimination. For comparison, the share was 30% for Finland as a whole.

Overeducation poses a key challenge for a functional labour market. In the dataset examined, an overeducated person is defined as someone whose education and skills could be suitable also in more demanding jobs. The question for self-reporting is formulated thus: "Given your level of education, work experience and skills, do you think you are over-educated for your current job?" The figure presented reflects how many respondents in an employment relationship indicated that they were overeducated for their current job. Among people aged 18–64 who had a foreign background and were born abroad, the percentage of all employed persons answering in the affirmative in 2018 was remarkable for all three counties but especially Kainuu (29%) and North Savo (27%). For Finland as a whole the share was 30%. This is connected to the "brain waste" phenomenon. The brain waste can be defined, as Elo et al. (2020) illuminate it clearly, as skill-talent-activity-related waste that takes place, in addition to skill-recognition, in subtle and social forms, when individuals are underperforming, not using at all or not fully employing their formal and/or practical talents and skills.

Table 2. Indicators for the integration of foreign-born people with a foreign background in Kymenlaakso, North Savo, and Kainuu 2018–2019 (%) (Data: Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland).

People born abroad with foreign background	Kainuu	Kymenlaakso	North Savo
Share of long-term unemployed of unemployed persons (2018)			
Years lived in Finland			
0-4 years	2,0	2,6	6,4
5-9 years	9,6	16,2	19,2
10+ years	23,1	28,4	23,1
Share of part-time employees among wage and salary earners (2019)			
Years lived in Finland			
0-4 years	58,8	28,5	32,3
5-9 years	34,9	31,3	30,7
10+ years	28,0	24,5	26,6
At-risk-of-poverty rate of employed persons (2018)			
Years lived in Finland			
0-4 years	16,7	18,9	23,8
5-9 years	12,2	18,7	14
10+ years	9,7	12,9	10,9
Share of population living in low employment household-dwelling units (2018)	26,2	31,3	26,4
Experience of discrimination at work (2018)	27,1	27,8	29,7
Overeducation (2018)	28,9	18,8	26,8

Synthesis: Linking theory and research results

In this article, we aimed to explore the community well-being and individual well-being of immigrants by economic integration indicators in sparsely populated areas of Finland, i.e., in Kymenlaakso, North Savo, and Kainuu. Community well-being is an abstract notion applied in several distinct community settings, such as particular neighbourhoods, and the related concept of social exclusion, while having entered widespread use, is not always clear in its precise meaning. The literature does provide some assistance in this regard, identifying four types of well-being: community objective and subjective well-being and individual-level objective and subjective well-being. To probe useful conceptual differences, we examined how these differ from each other as illuminated by the empirical data in our study. Community and individual well-being are the sum of social conditions that make the flourishing of human beings and communities possible. The four-dimensional model of community and individual well-being change also provides a theoretical framework for well-being research.

Employment is indeed a high priority for Finland's government and work-based immigration (Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government, 2019). Immigrants' position in the labour market is often cited as the primary indicator for integration among adults (Dunlavy and Gauffin, 2020). Many researchers (e.g. Ahmad, 2015; Heikkilä and Yeasmin, 2021; Pehkonen, 2017; 2018) have shown this, and employment enables interaction with new and old members of the community, increasing opportunities for local knowledge and for learning Finnish/Swedish. It provides an opportunity to build a future, and economic independence makes involvement in society easier – if the work is not low-paying. Unemployment, in contrast, is a social risk, producing social problems especially if prolonged. In efforts to find ways of reducing these social risks and social problems, welfare states have attempted to activate unemployed people but also have tried to integrate them better into society. Doing so is important, because unemployed people can be excluded through being powerless to change their own lives. Unemployment may well lead to poverty and to social exclusion, then to a decline in well-being. These phenomena pose a big challenge in society, especially because social exclusion can extend across generations (Toikko and Pehkonen, 2018).

Our study indicates that some economic and social processes are underway in Kymenlaakso, North Savo, and Kainuu. The database we used from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2021) afforded broad-based and deep knowledge of the living conditions and experiences of immigrants in the counties studied. Through the

research, we identified economic integration of people with foreign backgrounds who were born abroad as a valuable indicator for community and individual objective well-being – i.e., the labour-market status of immigrants in the counties examined. We found their unemployment to be considerably higher than that of people with either Finnish or foreign background born in Finland. Long-term unemployment (unemployment that has persisted uninterrupted for at least 12 months) is another important phenomenon in the labour market. Examining it, we found – to our surprise – that the percentage of unemployed people with long term unemployment among unemployed persons of foreign background who were born abroad was highest (at 23–28%) among those having lived in Finland at least 10 years in the study counties as of 2018. Part-time workers also account for a large share of the immigrant populations. For a person who is willing to work full-time, openings in this domain can create a push to search for work somewhere else, outside the study counties. Through such mechanisms, these presented indicators may lead to either positive or negative individual level subjective well-being for people facing struggles with long-term unemployment and not entering a full-time employment contract.

Several other indicators supported by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment's data similarly attest to a well-being gap: the at-risk-of-poverty rate among employed persons, the percentage of the population living in low-employment household-dwelling units, experience of discrimination at work, and overeducation representing the possibility that one's education and skills might be suitable also for a more demanding job. These shed light on both individual-level objective and subjective well-being. In all three counties, some immigrants live in such circumstances. It is particularly alarming that experiences of discrimination at workplace were surprisingly common, cited by 27–30% of respondents in the counties examined. These different economic indicators can effect on their own part to the subjective well-being of immigrants in the study counties, and in wider terms to sense of belonging there. The experiences probed can play a part in willingness to leave the region.

Kymenlaakso, North Savo, and Kainuu are among the many regions of Finland that suffer from labour shortages. The immigrants already living in these counties are an important human resource that could serve the local labour markets. Although utilising these immigrants and their human capital and also labour migration as potential solutions in the toolbox for responding to labour shortages, this requires support for community inclusiveness and belongingness, coupled with immigrants' social well-being – support for work satisfaction, economic self-sufficiency, positive relations with others, education opportunities, suitable occupations, seeds for hope and aspirations, a sense of self-reliance, prospects for the future, etc. These elements display a positive correlation with life satisfaction. In contrast, unemployment is a risk factor linked to weakened income levels, sometimes even leading to poverty, and to reductions in individual-level subjective well-being. The negative effects of unemployment on immigrants' subjective well-being have been well-researched (e.g., Heikkilä and Yeasmin, 2021; Lyytinen and Toom, 2019). Educated people joining the workforce is a very important driving factor in the upskilling of the workforce; however, there is demand for labour from immigrants of all educational backgrounds, in various economic sectors.

We can critically discuss the reliability of research results since subjective and objective well-being at community and individual level can be derived from many different sources and angles. Our research findings have illuminated the aspects of well-being issues by our specific data. The measure of subjective well-being can be constructed by including various components (e.g., Buttler et al., 2016). Life satisfaction refers to well-being, which is based on the individuals' assessment and cognitive reflection of their life situation (VanderWeele, 2021). Another way of measuring subjective well-being is based on emotions. Furthermore, subjective well-being may be approached as a meaning of life. One might also reasonably wonder whether our used indicators are relevant for assessing

the economic well-being of the individual and the community which are connected in wider terms to community belonging. Using different well-being indicators to assess well-being more deeply will certainly be desirable in the future research settings, too. There is a need to assess both objective and subjective aspects of well-being by different population groups in the communities. It is also important to develop further on different research methods.

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