

Newly Arrived Migrants' Experiences of Encounters with Frontline Bureaucrats

Andrea Spehar

Frontline bureaucrats in institutions such as the Public Employment Service, social services, SFI (Swedish for Immigrants) education, and maternity clinics play a central role in newly arrived migrants' integration into society. They make decisions regarding support and measures that significantly affect the migrants' future in their new country. Frontline bureaucrats also hold a unique position in a democratic society as they serve as a link between the state and the citizens. Their exercise of authority not only impacts the service provided and the decisions made in individual cases but also influences the relationship between citizens and the state.

For newly arrived migrants, their first interactions in the new country often involve caseworkers at various government agencies. Their experiences in these encounters greatly influence how they understand and navigate the new society. Previous research provides strong evidence that encounters between frontline bureaucrats and foreign-born individuals impact their trust in authorities.

Understanding and seriously considering newly arrived clients' experiences in these interactions is therefore crucial for developing a more effective and legally secure integration policy.

The Encounter Between Frontline Bureaucrats and Newly Arrived Clients – A Complex Interplay of Laws, Discretion, Interpretation, and Power Imbalance

Frontline bureaucrats must follow laws and policies while also having some discretion to adapt measures based on individual client needs. They face conflicting demands—ensuring legal certainty and equal treatment while simultaneously taking into account clients' unique backgrounds and circumstances.

Frontline bureaucrats' personal values, attitudes, and experiences significantly influence how they interpret regulations and interact with clients. Research has shown that bureaucrats who hold positive views on diversity and integration tend to be more flexible and individualized in their approach, while those who perceive immigration as a burden more frequently emphasize regulatory frameworks and control mechanisms.

For newly arrived clients, encounters with frontline bureaucrats often serve as their first contact with the Swedish welfare state. Previous research indicates a clear link between the treatment they receive from frontline bureaucrats and their perception of the authority. At the same time, the power dynamics in these interactions are unevenly distributed in favor of the bureaucrat, who has institutional backing and greater knowledge of the system. In contrast, the client is in a position of dependency on an organization over which they have little influence. Furthermore, having not grown up in Sweden, they have not undergone the same formal and informal learning processes regarding the country's social structures and institutions, making it harder for them to access, understand, and evaluate societal information.

A Study of Newly Arrived Clients' Experiences of Encounters with Frontline Bureaucrats

Between 2017 and 2021, approximately 150 qualitative interviews were conducted with newly arrived Syrian refugees and frontline bureaucrats. The data collection took place in several densely populated districts in Gothenburg with a high proportion of residents with foreign backgrounds. The study focused on four policy areas: Employment (Public Employment Service); Livelihood and Housing (Social Services and Establishment Unit); and Education (Swedish Language Education for Immigrants, SFI); Healthcare (Maternity Clinics).

A Desire for Faster Processes, Individual Adaptation, and Greater Influence

Our study shows that many newly arrived migrants are motivated and goal-oriented, striving to quickly enter the labor market or education. However, they perceive their interactions with various agencies as slow-moving and insufficiently individualized.

They express frustration over what is sometimes seen as a lack of understanding and interest in their previous experiences and an unwillingness to consider their personal goals, such as learning Swedish or accelerating processes. They feel that government agencies hinder their plans and that they have little influence over case processing and their future. Many wish their experiences and skills from before moving to Sweden were given greater weight in the planning of concrete measures. They emphasize the importance of receiving guidance and information tailored to their personal background and circumstances rather than generic information meant for all newly arrived clients.

However, dissatisfaction is primarily expressed in situations where trust between the client and caseworker is lacking, meetings have been infrequent, and communication has been inadequate.

The Importance of Treatment and Trust

Interviewees describe feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and meaninglessness in their encounters with employment officers, social workers, and SFI teachers. Clients who feel poorly treated dwell on these experiences, repeatedly bringing them up, and continue to have limited trust in the authorities. Many feel distrusted, especially in social services and the Public Employment Service, where they believe they must prove their willingness to participate in society. In contrast, treatment at maternity clinics and SFI education is often more positive, as these institutions are perceived as having a more pedagogical and supportive role rather than a controlling function.

A poor reception is characterized by clients feeling reduced to mere cases rather than being seen as individuals. They describe how standardized measures replace individualized solutions and how they get stuck in action plans that do not align with their skills or needs. Employment officers and social workers are often perceived as disinterested, providing limited personal contact and guidance. Clients express a need for more support and coaching but feel left alone in critical stages.

At the same time, they report that treatment varies, and an engaged, trusting, and encouraging approach can have a significant personal impact. Continuous contact with the same caseworker creates a sense of security and facilitates integration. However, difficulties in reaching caseworkers cause frustration and uncertainty. Clients describe their interactions with social services and the Public Employment Service as fragmented, with infrequent visits and a lack of follow-up. In some cases, caseworkers have stopped responding despite previous agreements.

Newly arrived clients seek more individualized meetings, better accessibility, and more frequent follow-ups. A continuous, personal, and communicative relationship would enhance trust and improve conditions for integration.

Culture and Values

Culture and values play a role in interactions between newly arrived clients and frontline bureaucrats, but not always in the way authorities expect. Instead of cultural differences and value conflicts, the main issues raised by clients concern actual bureaucratic practices, such as accessibility, fairness, accuracy of decisions, equal treatment, and the ability to file complaints or switch caseworkers.

Newly arrived clients do not see cultural norms as the primary difficulty but rather a lack of understanding from caseworkers about their previous experiences. They sometimes call for greater competence and more empathy for the precarious situation they face as refugees.

Concluding remarks

The encounter with frontline bureaucrats is crucial for newly arrived migrants' ability to establish themselves in Sweden and for their trust in the welfare state. Many clients have high expectations of support and guidance during their first years in Sweden, but these expectations often diminish after a few interactions with the frontline bureaucracy.

Discretion, individual adaptation, and treatment are the most important factors influencing how encounters with frontline bureaucrats are perceived. At the same time, these meetings are not just about administering support and services but also about building relationships, fostering understanding, and navigating complex needs and expectations.

A positive experience does not necessarily mean that the client receives the desired decision. Instead, a positive perception is based on the client feeling heard, respected, and acknowledged.

Policy recommendations

- To strengthen newly arrived clients' trust and satisfaction, inter-agency cooperation and client interactions should be improved. Continuous and personal contact with the same caseworker is crucial for effective public administration. Organizational conditions must be established to enable frontline bureaucrats to show greater engagement and attention.
- A good understanding of the client's situation is essential in interactions with newly arrived clients. Frontline bureaucrats should be aware of their clients' migration processes, socioeconomic conditions, and limited knowledge of the Swedish system. They play a key role in explaining how Swedish structures and norms function, which facilitates labor market integration and self-sufficiency.
- Early discussions about mutual expectations can reduce the risk of misunderstandings and disappointment. This is not only about informing the client but also about understanding their expectations and past experiences. Clarifying roles, responsibilities, and work processes strengthens both communication and the client's understanding of the agency's mission.
- Continuous follow-ups ensure that information and decisions are understood and accepted. Newly arrived migrants receive information from many different sources, making it difficult to process and absorb. Regular feedback is therefore essential to clarify messages, address misunderstandings, and increase comprehension of decisions and the Swedish welfare system.
- The digitalization of public services has led to fewer in-person meetings in favor of digital services. This shift may exclude newly arrived individuals who lack access to technology, the internet, or knowledge of digital systems. Fewer face-to-face meetings between clients and caseworkers may also reduce trust in authorities and their decisions, as it becomes harder to clarify information and address misunderstandings. Therefore, public agencies should combine digital services with physical meetings to ensure that newly arrived individuals receive the necessary support.

Reading tips

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