



The aftermath of fatal violence incidents: Why organisational measures were successful and why their effects diminished

Kurt Elvegård^{a,*}, Stian Antonsen^b

^a NTNU Social Research, Dragvoll Allé 31b, 7491 Trondheim, Norway

^b NTNU, Postboks 8900, 7491 Trondheim, Norway

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, an employee at a human service office in Norway was killed by a service recipient. Fast forward to 2021, another murder took place. As is often the case after recurring unwanted events, questions arose in the public debate regarding the human service organisation's measures to counteract violence and why it could still occur, even after thorough evaluation and efforts made to improve working conditions. This article addresses these questions by delving into safety measures and efforts within the organisation and adopting an organisational perspective on the complexities of maintaining a robust violence prevention framework over time. 82 qualitative interviews were conducted with 101 managers and employees from different organisational levels and locations nationwide, in addition to a few with employees from partner organisations. A perceived effect of implemented measures and fewer violence incidents indicate a successful initiative. Nevertheless, the focus on violence prevention diminished gradually and safety issues were not addressed in new plans for organising and developing the organisation and its services. The work against violence was also characterised by fragmentation. This decline is attributed to shifting priorities caused by both internal and external conditions. The study illustrates the importance of studying safety improvements over a time span long enough to consider whether short-term effects are lasting when faced with shifting priorities originating from institutional conditions and focusing events influencing public debate and political legitimacy.

1. Introduction

This article addresses a Norwegian human service organisation's struggle to prevent violence committed by service users – in which they both succeeded and failed. It started in the late summer of 2013 when an employee was killed by a service recipient at a public service office. The office belonged to the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), one of the largest government agencies in Norway. The service organisation with offices in every Norwegian municipality is responsible for labour market measures, welfare benefits, and social assistance.

Murders like this are rare in Norway (STAMI, 2021). The event garnered significant attention and discussions in the media, the general public, among national authorities, and within the NAV organisation itself. As always, after high-consequence and high-profile incidents, the internal and external expectations are to learn by identifying causes and implementing measures to ensure that history does not repeat itself (e.g. Carroll et al., 2002; Starbuck and Farjoun, 2005; Drupsteen and Hasle, 2014; Stark, 2019).

In the aftermath of the murder, NAV worked intensively on violence prevention and were mainly considered successful in their efforts, as this paper will reveal. However, in the fall of 2021, it happened again. A service user launched a knife attack during a meeting, resulting in the death of one employee and the injury of another. Once again, critical questions emerged from the public – How could this happen in NAV again, with all the resources invested in violence prevention?

The article aims to bring insight into the role of organisational factors in violence prevention within service organisations. This is done by studying the work against violence in NAV following the first murder in 2013. It focuses on preventing and managing violence and explores the organisational factors that provide the context for this management. Data comes from a research project conducted between 2017 and 2018 investigating employees' experience of violence prevention measures. The data are seen in light of NAV's evolution over the past decade, especially after the second murder in 2021. Findings from the research project strongly suggest that the numerous actions taken after the first incident were largely successful. The measures were deemed necessary,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: kurt.elvegaard@samforsk.no (K. Elvegård), stian.antonsen@ntnu.no (S. Antonsen).

on-point, well-implemented, and supported by the employees (Elvegård and Almvik, 2023). In particular, measures enhancing employees' communication skills, knowledge, and competence garnered positive feedback. These changes impacted the dynamic between users and staff, a perspective also highlighted in other studies (FAFO, 2019; Pariseau-Legault et al., 2019).

The public debate on working conditions in the organisation studied made the researchers ask why violence occurred, even after successfully implementing organisational measures. Although the risk of work-related violence will obviously never be zero, the recurring incidents challenged the legitimacy of both the organisation and the measures taken. The empirical evidence from this research project underscores the necessity of paying attention to general conditions within and around NAV. It became evident that acknowledging these broader factors was imperative for sustaining violence prevention over time – and understanding what happened in the organisation. The attention was therefore led to an organisational perspective on the findings, which ended up with the following research question: What could explain the persistence of violence within a Norwegian human service organisation despite previous endeavours being deemed successful in combating such issues?

Although the study was designed to be exploratory, it is theoretically linked to the literature on (intra-)organisational learning in general and learning from incidents in particular (e.g. Drupsteen and Hasle, 2014). At the same time, the characteristics of the NAV organisation – its public function and position in a political-administrative governance structure – mean that institutional perspectives (e.g. (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Shepherd and Rudd, 2014) cannot be ignored. Combining internal and external organisational perspectives was thus an important point of departure for the study.

2. Background – The organisation and its violence prevention initiative

As introduced, NAV is one of the largest government agencies in Norway. It has around 22,000 employees. 6500 of these are employed by the municipalities since NAV cooperates locally with all municipalities in the country. NAV serves 2.8 million people annually and manages one-third of the state budget (Norwegian Government, n.d.). It resulted from a merger of the Employment and National Insurance Administration and a more formal collaboration with the municipality's social service administration (Christensen et al., 2007; Løgreid and Rykkja, 2014). This means that NAV is responsible for a broad spectrum of services to various user groups, for example, labour market measures for people looking for jobs, social benefits like sick child leave for ordinary wage-earners and follow-up of people in need of more extensive assistance related to social security, mental health issues or drug abuse (NAV, 2023b). The primary motivation for the merger of services was to address “wicked cases” by cutting across policy fields and territorial levels (Christensen et al., 2014). Whether NAV has succeeded in managing such cases has been up for debate. For example, employees have stated that frustration over economic issues, mental health, influence from drugs and waiting time are significant causes of violence from service users and that front-line workers are the most exposed (NAV, 2023b). Apart from preliminary, supplementary, and follow-up work, the job at these offices is to meet service users at the reception area or in adapted meeting rooms.

In addition to the local offices, the NAV organisation consists principally of two other levels. The second level is the county division level, which supports the local offices on specialised subjects like, for instance, safety/security and IT. They also connect the first level with the third level, the Directorate of Labour and Welfare (the Directorate). The Directorate is the organisation's highest administrative level and “has a national specialist responsibility [and] administers and interprets legislation and ensures that policy guidelines are implemented in practice” (NAV, 2024b). The Directorate has eight divisions, and some of the divisions have sub-divisions.

In the aftermath of the murder, NAV worked intensively on violence prevention, led by the Directorate. The violence prevention initiative followed a traditional logic of inquiry and improvement: A comprehensive survey was conducted to assess employee safety, ending with a report documenting the findings. As a result of this report, several proposals for organisational and physical measures were initiated (NAV, 2014). Some notable measures were a so-called *minimum standard* outlining comprehensive guidelines for office design and an employee training program focusing on violence preventive communication. Except for specific measures, anchoring the work against violence in the whole organisation and improving the general service delivery has shown to be essential in the organisation's violence prevention efforts (Elvegård and Almvik, 2023).

The effects were, however, not limited to the boundaries of the NAV organisation. The murder, coupled with the subsequent killing of an employee at a child welfare institution in 2014, intensified efforts to amend regulations related to the Working Environment Act (Regulations Concerning the Performance of Work, 2013). The rules were incorporated into NAV, especially requirements for risk assessment and procedures for preventing violence. The regulation included requirements for risk assessment and procedures for preventing violence, among several other provisions. These provisions were incorporated into NAV. Legislative changes in the working environment might evolve independently of specific incidents. Still, the amendment in the regulation underscores an organisation's need to interact with and adapt to the broader societal context and vice versa. This dynamic interaction is typical for most organisations (Raveel and Schoenmakers, 2019).

3. Violence – A severe working environment problem

Violence is defined as all kinds of threats and violent acts from service users directed at employees (Waddington et al., 2005). This includes physical or verbal abuse, intimidation, sexual assault or harassment, and property damage or theft in work-related situations, with an overt or implied threat to their safety, health, or well-being (International Labour Organization, 2020; Nyberg et al., 2021; Philthingvad et al., 2019). It causes acute feelings of fear before, during, and after incidents (Keesman and Weenink, 2020) and increases risks of mental health issues like depression (Andersen et al., 2021; Madsen et al., 2021), anxiety (Rudkjoebing et al., 2020) and suicide (Hanson et al., 2023). It is also associated with long-term physical ailments such as an increased risk of cardiovascular disease (Xu et al., 2019), diabetes (Xu et al., 2018) and, in general, a higher number of visits to general practitioners and outpatient treatment (Fris et al., 2019). Exposure to violence affects commitment and participation at work (Courcy et al., 2019) and causes lower workforce participation (Biering et al., 2018). Violence is also associated with low job satisfaction (Li et al., 2020), burn-out or fatigue (Hogh et al., 2003; Parveen et al., 2023), high turnover (Courcy et al., 2019) and sick leave (Sterud et al., 2021).

In Norway, the number of people exposed to some form of violence in society in general has remained at just over 5 per cent annually since the 1980s. In 2007, there was a shift when the number of violence victims decreased, only to show an increase again in the 2018 survey (Statistics Norway, 2019). This rise is primarily attributed to a higher proportion of reported incidents occurring in a work-related context. In 2019, 7.1 per cent of individuals experienced violence or threats at their workplace (STAMI, 2021). This indicates that while the overall rate of violence in society has remained stable or even decreased over time, work violence has increased. The prevalence of workplace violence is estimated to be an average of two per cent higher than in the rest of Europe (Parent-Thirion et al., 2007). This difference and the fact that violence in Norwegian society, in general, is comparatively low on the international stage prompt a closer examination.

Violence occurs the most in Norway's health and social sector (STAMI, 2021). A survey among social service employees in Norwegian found that 44 per cent of the members had been subjected to violence

Table 1
Overview of interviews.

Types of interviews	Types of informants	Number (individuals)
Standardised, individual, by phone	Employees and managers at NAV offices	42 (42)
Semi-structured, group and individual, on-site	Employees and managers at NAV offices	28 (46)
	Employees and managers at regional offices	4 (4)
	Employees and managers at the Directorate	4 (3)
	External partners	4 (6)
Total		82 (101)

over a year. For 16 per cent, this was monthly or more often (FAFO, 2019). The survey documented that the younger, male part of the workforce and private sector employees experienced more violence than those working in the public sector, foundations, or non-profit organisations. The frequency was lowest in the state (FAFO, 2019). The findings are consistent with studies from other countries (Padyab and Ghazinour, 2015; Sicora et al., 2021). Within NAV, 37 % of employees had encountered violence (FAFO, 2019). Although the respondents from NAV were among the least exposed compared to other respondents in the survey, the figure is high. According to NAV's data (NAV, 2023b), 30 per cent of employees reported experiencing harassment or physical violence. Moreover, NAV has faced the additional challenges of two murders, contributing to heightened uncertainty and stress. Violent incidents had consequences for around a quarter of employees in the organisation, particularly in the form of dissatisfaction at work (FAFO, 2019).

While comparisons between studies, occupations, and countries may not always be straightforward (Parveen et al., 2023; Waddington et al., 2005), it is evident that violence poses a significant challenge in the work environment in Norway and other countries. As a result of these developments, demands for safe work conditions are seemingly rising. For example, recent studies on human services in Norway showed that employees expect the workplace to facilitate safe working conditions (Elvegård and Almvik, 2023; Slaatto et al., 2021). Research from other countries and within different disciplines shows the same (Andersen et al., 2019; Morken et al., 2015). Furthermore, changes in legislation over time have clarified employers' responsibility for ensuring safe and secure working conditions (Regulations Concerning the Performance of Work, 2013).

4. An organisational perspective

Approaches to work-related violence might vary. One evident perspective in the study of human service organisations has been the dynamic between the service recipients and the employees (Pariseau-Legault et al., 2019). This also applies to the case in this study (Bakken and van der Wel, 2023; Sadeghi and Fekjær, 2019), but other perspectives might also be relevant in combating work violence. One of these is an organisational perspective. Despite some attention over the years (Bowie, 2011; Sheppard et al., 2022; Viitasara and Menckel, 2002), this remains a less explored research area. Together with other researchers (Salmon et al., 2022; Tamatea et al., 2023), we want to emphasise the significance of general organisational factors within service organisations and influencing factors outside them in managing and preventing violence.

Organisational factors can be defined as all the overarching conditions affecting an organisation's and its personnel's actions. Within the human service sector, this might be factors like teamwork dynamics (Turpin et al., 2019), collegial support (Sicora et al., 2021) or issues related to the importance of organisational safety culture (Koskiniemi et al., 2023; Nielsen et al., 2023) and safety climate (Gadegaard et al., 2018; Spector et al., 2007; Spector et al., 2015; Viitasara and Menckel, 2002). One study, yet cross-sectional, revealed a correlation between violence and interaction between colleagues on the one hand and safety culture on the other hand (Arnetz et al., 2018). In contrast, work stress, a

factor we might expect would increase the risk of violence, did not correlate (op.cit.).

Studies have also shown that supervision, involvement and commitment from management and leadership contribute to work violence prevention (Andersen et al., 2019; Shier et al., 2021), is demanded by employees (McMahon et al., 2017; Tan et al., 2015) and that the absence of this factor is associated with higher exposure to work violence (Sheppard et al., 2022; Pariona-Cabrera et al., 2020). This underlines the importance of an organisational perspective in the work against violence.

Research also exists into the effects of organisational interventions aiming to reduce work-related violence. Two reviews of health research from the Cochrane Collaboration suggest a degree of uncertainty regarding the effect of organisational interventions (Geoffrion et al., 2020; Spelten et al., 2020). Despite this, various other studies indicate that combating work violence and reducing its effects is feasible, even within large and complex organisations (Recsky et al., 2023; Shier et al., 2021; Andersen et al., 2024; Spector et al., 2015).

All these research findings and factors are highly relevant for NAV and its initiative against violence, as NAV, among other things, managed to align their understanding of violence and adjust routines throughout the organisation (Elvegård and Almvik, 2023), exemplifying the impact of both a focus on culture and leadership. However, whether there, for example, was a previous culture change or whether top-level leadership was actively involved during the initiative does not tell us why the successful measures disappeared. On the contrary, the presence of these elements makes the aftermath of the first murder even more challenging to understand. It is evident in this study that leadership should be a topic. The question is *why* this factor was either absent or present. Therefore, elements not directly related to work violence prevention must be included.

There are several other organisational factors of importance within human services. Other relevant factors might be service delivery, optimal use of human and other resources, strategy and clear mandates, vision and goals (Valaitis et al., 2018). These are examples of meaningful factors but not necessarily connected to combating violence alone. In this article, it is acknowledged that NAV, like any organisation of a specific size, exhibits considerable heterogeneity across local offices and organisational levels (Christensen et al., 2014). This makes management and organisational change complex and unpredictable. However, this organisational heterogeneity does not negate the impact of higher levels in shaping framework conditions, providing attention and visibility to various work practices, both in work violence issues, as mentioned, and during other organisational development processes (Bernhardt, 2022; Bisbey et al., 2021).

Organisational heterogeneity is also an essential factor for understanding the NAV organisation. In fact, one of the very purposes of establishing NAV was to integrate heterogeneous yet interrelated services in Norwegian public administration's work and welfare sector. The cross-sectoral challenges involved in integrating service delivery across the sectoral division of labour is a common problem in Norway and other countries (Almklov & Antonsen, 2010; Champion and Bonoli, 2011; Elliott et al., 2022; Løgreid and Rykkja, 2014). Merging different service organisations into NAV might have coordinated service delivery – although this has also been a matter up for discussion – but the merger

was not done for safety and security reasons. Internal coordination issues could still be an issue, as highlighted in safety studies in other organisations (Nilsen et al., 2022).

While the internal conditions within the service organisation are no doubt important (Morphet et al., 2019), an organisation like NAV cannot be understood without taking into account the powerful forces and framework conditions in the organisation's environment, for instance, how overarching societal policy agendas affect violence prevention in the workplace (Espelage et al., 2013; Raveel and Schoenmakers, 2019). NAV and other human service organisations depend on resources, political legitimacy, and societal acceptance from the outside world, which strongly influence its characteristics and design (Bekkedal, 2022). Like any other organisation, NAV is shaped by the interaction between dominant social actors, led by the media, politicians, and civil servants (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Shepherd and Rudd, 2014).

Many theoretical perspectives could be applied for framing the relationship between NAV and its organisational environment, for instance, various forms of neo-institutionalism like the decoupling between formal structures and actual practices (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) or competing institutional logics (e.g. Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012). The garbage can model for organisational decision-making (Cohen et al., 1972) and the associated multiple streams framework (Kingdon, 1984, 2010) would be candidates for analysing the various ways problems, policies, and politics interact in producing decisions around violence prevention. However, as the goal of our analysis is the empirical exploration of factors that may explain the waning effects of the violence prevention initiative in NAV, the theoretical starting point needed to be more open than what would be the case if we were to decide on one of the mentioned theoretical framings. For an organisation like NAV, apparent power structures strongly link its inner workings to its environment. The Norwegian government, and more precisely, the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, directly controls NAV's financial resources and overall prioritisation. Hence, the administrative hierarchy of the Norwegian public sector means that actors outside NAV have significant power over internal prioritizations in NAV. In the simple definition of Salancik and Pfeffer (1989), they have "the ability to get things done the way one wants them to be done".

The priorities of political-administrative decision-makers are, in turn, heavily influenced by media attention and agenda-setting processes that can question, challenge, change or reinforce public policy (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Focusing events, such as sudden and unpredictable incidents that trigger attention to policy problems, play an essential part in these processes (Birkland, 1997). This brings us back to the murder of the NAV employee in 2013. We see the murder as an important focusing event for both the political-administrative decision-makers and the NAV organisation itself. It symbolised the need for "upgrading" the logic of employee safety in the relationship with the dominant logic of client-centred service delivery. However, as we will discuss in section 7.2, the urgency of one focusing event can expire when new events occur, symbolising the need to prioritise other areas or organisational performance.

5. Methods

The article draws on data from a research project conducted between 2017 and 2018, focusing on an initiative to combat violence within NAV. The study captured employees' experiences of the initiative and the various security measures introduced. NAV was monitored over time, including the phase when other parallel changes were made in the organisation due to reorganisation and renewal processes. This approach made examining any experience of lasting, perceived effects possible. During the research period office visits and review of a number of internal documents from the organisation were executed, but only interview data is used in the article. The study followed a pragmatic, qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007) guided by a phenomenological

method that prioritised describing shared employee experiences rather than extensive interpretation (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). For the execution of the project, this way of thinking was as much a methodological/ontological approach as a method. The studied organisation is large, and it was a deliberate choice to make each individual employee's experience count, as we expected that the murder of a colleague impacted people on the front line differently than those working in other places in the organisation. This especially applied to the semi-structured interviews, but the standardised interviews were also conducted to tap into experiences.

At the same time, due to the organisation's size and diversity, and, therefore, the size of the data material, the individual statements and the situation at each office had to be compared with the rest of the data, according to a hermeneutic understanding (Eberle, 2014) and the principle of constant comparing (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). This helped to avoid losing sight of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Wernet, 2014), which was the experience of violence prevention and no other aspects of interest – whatever they were in such a large organisation. The principle of constant comparing (Glaser and Strauss, 2017) also formed the foundation in the sense that new topics were incorporated on the way based on their perceived significance and that data analysis started during the initial interviews.

5.1. Data selection

The sample consisted of informants from all levels in NAV, including the Directorate, the county offices, and a selection of NAV offices. The selection process involved a purposive sampling strategy, an approach guided by criteria deemed most relevant to address the research questions (Rapley, 2014). Individual informants and offices were chosen in collaboration with the Directorate, considering criteria such as experience with violence, violence prevention, variation in user group size and composition, geographical distribution, internal organisation, degree of collaboration with other agencies, and proximity to facilities like the police and other public services. Age and gender were also considered to ensure a sample that was as representative as possible. The informants in the sample must be assumed to have the best knowledge of violence prevention in the organisation. The size of the organisation, the internal differences, the locations, and the diversity made it necessary to conduct a high number of interviews: 82 standardised or semi-structured interviews with 101 informants.

Half of the offices in the sample had been subjects of NAV's internal investigation a few years prior, triggered by the mentioned murder in 2013. The researchers were given access to the interview notes from this investigation. This enabled targeted questions about the office's work against violence and allowed for examining the evolution of prevention measures. In addition, representatives from NAV's collaborative partners were interviewed. These organisations were NAV's partners in formulating measures against violence in 2014 and are included in the stated number of informants.

5.2. Data collection

All the offices received a written request from the Directorate to participate in the project. Only one of the offices declined. The heads of each office provided employee names for interviews in addition to being interviewed themselves. That procedure contributed to a representative sample and made it easier for the employees to attend. The researchers contacted the informants from the county offices, the Directorate, and the partners directly.

Standardised, individual interviews involved 42 employees and managers from 22 NAV offices (Table 1). These interviews were conducted by phone (de Leeuw, 2008) since the informants were spread nationwide, and we had already planned visits to different offices. The interviewer was a project employee. The interviews sought insights into employees' experiences and opinions about measures from 2013 to the

present. Extensive notes were taken during the sessions, and the interview guide was used as a template. The interviews consisted of two parts. In one part, open-ended questions were posed to make the informants talk freely about their experiences from the violence prevention initiative or the present office situation. After that, the focus was on conditions at each specific office. The interviewer would typically ask: "From the summary of the interview with employees from your office in 2013, I can see that ... Can you tell me more about that?". For example, one office reported in 2013 that they had security guards at the office. This is not common at all offices, and the interviews asked whether or not they still used security guards. In the other part, all participants were asked standardised questions, such as how important the informant considered violence prevention at their office was now or whether they had received violence prevention training. This indicates that these interviews had a twofold purpose. One was to gather personal experiences and opinions. The other was to collect specific information and facts about the violence prevention initiative.

A total of 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted on-site with different informant groups (Table 1). Initially, interviews with Directorate informants were conducted to identify relevant questions (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). From that point on, the interview guide was adapted based on the informant's origin and the circumstances of each office (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). On-site interviews provided an opportunity to look at local circumstances and ask relevant follow-up questions. Interviews encompassed both individuals and groups. Group interviews allowed for reflection among attendees and reaching as many employees as possible. Individual interviews were conducted at smaller offices or based on sensitivity considerations and personal preferences (Smithson, 2008). When only one researcher was present, notes were taken, and the interview was recorded. This mainly concerned interviews with individuals. One researcher managed notes in team situations while the other engaged with informants. Due to the large number of interviews, the interviews are not transcribed.

5.3. Data analysis

Data analysis started after the initial interviews, and coding was conducted throughout the data collection process (Holton, 2010). The final analysis of the semi-structured interviews was analysed and coded by the first author and a co-researcher, and the standardised interviews by the first author. These analyses began by identifying overall qualitative patterns in the data material (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). At this stage in the analysis, the dominant idea was to understand how the violence prevention efforts, initiated from a central, administrative level, unfolded in the employees' everyday working lives. Subsequently, data were systematically coded and categorised thematically across the interviews (Creswell, 2007). Finally, the results from all the interviews were analysed by both researchers, increasing the reliability and validity of the analysis (Cornish et al., 2014). Overlapping categories were removed. The remaining findings and categories were discussed, compared, and adjusted. Some categories were retained, and some were regrouped. The result was 15 categories that constituted the main findings. The overarching themes of these categories related to the employees' experience with the violence prevention initiative, which factors they considered impacted managing and preventing violence and how the initiative's specific measures had worked out. For this article, six specific findings in the data set were cross-checked, further analysed and addressed in detail. While an organisational perspective has been used on the six findings, it was essential to constantly compare these findings with the overall data material, according to a hermeneutic understanding (Eberle, 2014; Wernet, 2014) to ensure that both the findings, the analysis and the organisational perspective were grounded in data, in the case (Glaser and Strauss, 2017).

6. Results

The study's findings present a dual perspective, encompassing the initiative against violence and the subsequent period. The first three findings, explaining why the initiative was successful, are gathered under the first subheading. The other three reveal what happened in the organisation when violence prevention efforts diminished. These are presented under separate headings, emphasising the conditions under scrutiny in this article.

6.1. Perceived effect, implemented measures, and less violence

Despite variation between individuals and offices, one of the most apparent findings in the study was that most NAV employees perceived the initiative against violence as successful in reducing the risk. Many office employees felt more acknowledged and listened to than before, with a heightened recognition of their need for security and orderly working conditions:

It was more legitimate to talk about and focus on violence and threats after 2013. The anti-violence initiative was a recognition of what we were doing. We felt taken care of by senior management.

The same emerged in the standardised telephone interviews with local employees and managers, where only one person expressed a negative view of the initiative. A few held neutral opinions, while the majority regarded the measures as reasonable or good. One of NAV's partners labelled the initiative as the best collaboration they had been involved in and specifically praised its project management. In the early meetings between NAV and the researchers, a pivotal question was whether the measures had been implemented throughout the organisation. Feedback from our informants, such as from this local employee, underscored that the initiative not only caused tangible measures but also shifts in attitudes and organisational culture:

We now have routines for everything and a new safety culture. This was not only a watershed for us in terms of visible, physical measures but just as much a recurring theme in our daily work. We developed heightened awareness.

Of the thirty offices contacted, only one reported not implementing any measures. According to the office manager, this was due to a positive work environment, virtually zero sick leave, and highly specialised work. These findings might not universally apply to the entire NAV system or all offices. Nevertheless, the consistent impression from our informants was that the situation was similar almost everywhere.

According to NAV's figures, the proportion of employees who reported being subjected to violence decreased after the measures were implemented. Numerous employees supported this perception. Several employees at the offices emphasised that the decline was attributed not only to the measures against violence but also to improvements in services:

We feel that we have become better at providing superior services, which reduces the number of incidents of violence. Before, there were significant backlogs that could lead to more incidents. [...] We have become better at organising the services and meeting users well.

While this service improvement was not explicitly part of the anti-violence measures, it was considered vital to comprehend NAV's operational dynamics. The following three findings relate to what happened in NAV after the initiative against violence.

6.2. Focus on violence prevention gradually diminished

Many informants experienced a gradual diminishing of violence prevention. Several were concerned about a development where safety was no longer prioritised, including one of the local NAV managers:

I cannot read in the management documents we received this year that the safety of employees is to be safeguarded. In the early years of NAV, there was much interest from the Directorate. Now it is more up to you to keep it warm

The informant calls attention to conditions in the Directorate, which was responsible for the initiative against violence. Another informant working with safety and security issues at the county department supported this, stating that the initiative was well accomplished but that the focus on violence and violence prevention gradually diminished. From his perspective, this was “obviously” due to the lack of governing signals, a factor that we will discuss later in the paper.

For some informants, a reduced focus seemed natural and justifiable. As statistics indicated a decline in violence, it became easier to prioritise other essential tasks within the organisation. The Directorate echoed this perspective:

That is just the way it is. A lot is going on, and it changes over time. We have an action plan. All directors focus on it until a problem pops up in another field. Then, the new problem gets priority.

Multiple factors could explain the perceived decline in focus. One important reason is related to the organisation and development of the services.

6.3. Less violence prevention in the new organisation

Violence prevention was less visible in the new NAV organisation for quite a few informants. NAV has undergone significant prioritisation, and service delivery has changed in recent years. Users have been redirected toward self-help solutions and electronic platforms, minimising the need to show up at the offices. The outcomes of this change have been extensive. It resulted in office closures, relocations and mergers, collectively termed *reorganisation*. Several informants expressed concerns about the limited attention to violence in the prioritisation plans. An employee at a small district office gave an example of a challenge related to both employees and service users:

I struggle to understand how fewer in-person appointments ensure physical security. We still have emergency care. We have nowhere for people to go while they wait. Should we have waiting rooms, and how will security be there? for example, we have an office located in a shopping centre. Users have to wait outside. The physical conditions are not in place

Another informant from a county office with an overview of the regional situation noted that the efforts to address violence did not align with the adjustments made by offices during the service reorganisation and re-prioritization.

6.4. Fragmentation

The initiative against violence had its' own project management and was executed in cooperation with external partners and selected vital personnel at the Directorate. A few years after the murder, the work against work violence in the Directorate appeared fragmented: One informant in a central position in the Directorate explained how the responsibility for combating violence was now suffering from being spread among different divisions and sub-divisions in the Directorate:

The HSE division works preventively. They do a good job but do not have the authority to instruct the local offices. Furthermore, one sub-division is responsible for designing and furnishing the premises and buildings. Another division owns the buildings, and we have one section that works with information security and preparedness.

The general fragmentation seemed to have been the situation also before the initiative, but this factor must be seen in context with the other two previously mentioned factors; as the focus on violence

prevention diminished in leadership and organisational changes, the impact of fragmentation seemed to increase. The implications of this will be discussed later, but the fragmentation seemed to spread throughout the organisation. A manager from a metropolitan office provided insight into the consequence of fragmentation:

In June 2017, we spent four hundred thousand rebuilding the reception. Among other things, it was arranged so that visitors could not jump over the counter, and a safe zone was created. Nine months later, we were told not to stand behind the counter. Instead, we should stand on the floor without any tools. Just a few months before, that was considered so dangerous that we were paid much money to lock ourselves in. So, things are introduced without any discussion.

This quotation displays one problem: limited communication between employees working with violence prevention and those responsible for organisational reconfigurations. One consequence was that some offices were designed without regard for physical measures against violence, although specific safety and security standards applied to all offices. Prevention measures had to be adopted in retrospect.

7. Discussion

The six findings in this study contribute to a discussion of why measures were deemed successful and why they disappeared. Combined, they provide a comprehensive understanding of the initiative's achievements and the subsequent shifts in focus and visibility within the organisation. The primary purpose of this paper is to explore what happened in the aftermath of the work violence prevention initiative in NAV. To understand what was at stake, we first presented findings indicating successful efforts to counteract violence in the organisation. At the beginning of the study, the researchers were prepared to hear substantial criticism concerning violence prevention in the organisation, given all the negative publicity. Different opinions in an organisation of 22,000 people would not be surprising. The study revealed disparities, but overall, the employees were far more optimistic about the initiative than expected. The measures against violence had been implemented in most places, and NAV's figures indicated a decline in violent episodes. Many believed better services caused the decline. Good services as a factor in preventing violence are also highlighted in NAV's, 2023 report (NAV, 2023b) and previous research (Elvegård and Almvik, 2023). So, the perceived effect of implemented measures and fewer violent incidents indicate a successful initiative.

At the same time, there were unambiguous findings of a gradual decrease in focus on violence and violence prevention, an absence of violence prevention and security discussions in the plans for NAV's new structure and organisational fragmentation in the Directorate. The interview data suggests that looking at organisational conditions is crucial for comprehending this development. We take two perspectives, one which looks at internal factors and conditions and a second that concerns external elements.

7.1. The internal perspective

Before discussing possible explanations, some nuances must be acknowledged. Firstly, there is no clear evidence of causal links between the murders in 2013 and 2021 and the violence prevention efforts in the organisation. NAV administers several significant welfare benefits and works with several groups of people with different needs. Although the service has been through various processes to adapt to a new era (Bernhardt, 2022), it is still desirable to have face-to-face services with minimum barriers and distances for service users (Norwegian Board of Health Supervision, 2022). Consequently, the probability of violence in NAV will never be zero, and the safety of employees must continuously be balanced against other issues. It is also worth mentioning that the external evaluation of the second employee murder stated that the

incident was well handled, albeit with some potential for improvement (PwC, 2022).

Secondly, the prevalence of violence within a vast and diverse organisation like NAV can vary, as highlighted by our informants. Several employees did not consider violence a significant work environment problem. Some had encountered severe incidents at their offices, while others reported no such experiences. This illustrates that violence develops differently in NAV, depending on geographical location, user groups, and other variables. In essence, serious incidents can occur in NAV even if most employees perceive the security measures as effective and are generally satisfied with their work situations.

According to our data, the climate (Gadegaard et al., 2018) and the culture (Shier et al., 2019) in the lower part of the organisation were calibrated for further focus on violence as a safety concern. Therefore, the main reason for the decline in violence prevention focus in the organisation appears to be a lack of priority at the top level. As some informants point out, this was caused by a decline in violent episodes. In that scenario, other tasks and themes became more pressing. An organisation with NAV's size and broad portfolio of tasks has a complex goal structure. This complexity can lead attention toward goals resulting from compromises or in a sequential manner as other goals take precedence at different times (Cyert and March, 1963). Consequently, strategic management is about balancing potentially conflicting objectives, a well-known topic in the safety science literature (e.g. Rasmussen, 1997). Examples of such objectives are front-line service delivery (Bakken and van der Wel, 2023), digitalisation processes (Bernhardt, 2022) and other overall reforms in the welfare system. One example is the so-called "Trust reform" (OECD, 2022; NAV, 2023b), which we will return to later because it shows the connection between the internal and external factors in this case.

Internal decision-making and prioritisation occur in an environment of uncertainty and competing interests. In the years after the 2013 murder, NAV had to solve contemporary issues that were considered equally or even more critically. A manager at the top level of the organisation stated that "a lot is going on all the time", exemplifying the need to balance conflicting objectives of which employee safety is only one (Rasmussen, 1997). In this setting, it seems easier to prioritise something closely related to focusing events (Birkland, 1997) than to ensure it stays strategically prioritised over time. As one informant put it – management tends to stay focused on pressing issues "until a problem pops up in another field". Extensive digitisation processes are among the things that received more attention and priority (Bernhardt, 2022).

The management's other priorities affected financial resources and attention throughout the organisation. This includes the violence prevention efforts and might have resulted in a situation where the thoroughly accomplished safety work was not easily incorporated into new service solutions, mergers of offices, and other changes. The findings thus confirm previous research that the knowledge and skills acquired in managing violent behaviour can only sometimes be employed after reorganising services (Baines, 2004) and that lack of leadership is associated with a higher risk of work violence (Pariona-Cabrera et al., 2020).

The fragmentation factor is also inherently complex. While the violence prevention initiative's project management earlier has been characterised as systematic, with precise duties, observance of time limits and delivery and sufficient internal team cooperation (Elvegård and Almvik, 2023), the situation changed. The violence prevention efforts were now fragmented as it followed the general structure of the Directorate, where each division worked separately on its own tasks. Managerial coordination and collaboration are essential to violence prevention (Sheppard et al., 2022; Nielsen et al., 2022). Since the momentum from the violence prevention initiative and its project management were no longer present as *watchdogs* for this issue, and top leadership had other priorities, the fragmentation effect became even more significant. Nothing was to guide and unify when the organisation's general focus on violence prevention decreased, and other priority

areas arose. This also resulted in the absence of HSE as a topic in the plans for the new organisation. Since the strategies and day-to-day work in the Directorate were guided by contemporary strategy documents or expressed priorities, violence prevention became less critical. The factors seem to reinforce each other's effect at this point. The absence of violence prevention in the new plans consolidated a further decline in focus on violence prevention. A once successful initiative diminished among all other imperative conditions the organisation was facing.

7.2. The external perspective

Management attention is by no means constructed in a vacuum. In an organisation like NAV, internal priorities are intricately connected to external factors. As a major human service organisation, NAV is responsible for crucial societal functions, services, and benefits. This entails various forms of external demands, attention, and expectations, such as supervision and risk assessment of social services (Norwegian Board of Health Supervision, 2022).

Furthermore, NAV has considerable political influence, making external influencing conditions significant. These circumstances pressure the organisation's strategic decisions (Shepherd and Rudd, 2014), especially through the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, which guides the directorate's prioritisation for the coming year through annual allocation letters. In the two following allocation letters after the murder in 2013, the word "violence" is mentioned respectively four and five times, while, for example, the allocation letter from 2023 does not mention it at all (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2014, 2015, 2023). Another recent example of influence from political leadership is the Trust Reform, the government's project to develop and renew the public sector (NAV, 2024a). Working on trust between citizens and authorities and public institutions has also been an international occupation in the last few years (OECD, 2022). NAV started its work with the reform in 2023, focusing on strengthening employee confidence and room for finding individual solutions with the service users (NAV, 2023b).

Another vital actor is the media, which influences the agenda of politics and public discourse by focusing on specific issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The so-called *Social Security Scandal* is one example (Bekkedal, 2022). This case concerned several people who had been wrongfully deducted from social security benefits and prosecuted for breaching regulations. As indicated, this became one of several *new* "focusing events" (Birkland, 1997), throwing NAV and its political stakeholders into a trust and legitimacy crisis. In such a crisis, there is an urgent need to do "something" to repair the trust and legitimacy in the eyes of external stakeholders and the general public (Gillespie et al., 2015). So, the shift in attention was on, with violence now just one out of many areas with high priority, and where others were even more urgent.

The link between the institutional environment and the role of sequential but different focusing events is essential, not only for the specific field of violence prevention but also for the broader field of safety science. The initial intervention to reduce work-related violence in NAV is a case of a successful learning-from-incident (LFI) process (e.g. Stanton et al., 2017). If our study had been an evaluation of the intervention, the conclusion would have been that NAV had achieved the holy grail of (intra-)organisational learning in the aftermath of an incident investigation. However, as we have shown, looking at the process in a longer time frame reveals a different picture. First, the effects of the intervention waned. Second, and importantly, the reasons behind this are as closely related to the organisational environment as to the intra-organisational factors. The reasons behind this erasure of intra-organisational learning from incidents sometimes (though not always) must be complemented by an inter-organisational perspective. Research from such a perspective is scarce in safety science, a point also made by Milch and Laumann (2016).

8. Limitations, strengths and implications

A few determining success criteria are subjective and should be open to debate. Employees' positive interpretations of the violence prevention initiative should not be interpreted as evidence that the original initiative was so successful that it could be decontextualised and implemented elsewhere. It is plausible that the employees' exposure to violence risk had previously been overlooked to the extent that they would respond positively to *any* change in safety measures, regardless of their substance (a variant of the "Hawthorne effect").

Despite these complexities, the employees' interpretations of the effectiveness of measures cannot be ignored as "indicators" when assessing safety. Employees know firsthand the conditions in everyday work and are directly impacted by the implemented measures. Thanks to close cooperation with the organisation, the researchers had access to a high number of informants and internal background documents that provided unique insight into the organisation's violence prevention efforts.

Although the study is a single-case study (Yin, 2009), the study provides a robust basis for making inferences about other organisations, although not in statistical terms. The number and variety of informants, the central positioning of NAV within the Norwegian welfare system, as well as the longitudinal design allow for studying the organisation over time, strengthening the transferability of the findings. This being said the institutional setup of the Norwegian welfare system has its peculiarities (see section 2), which need to be taken into account when considering transferability to other institutional contexts.

For researchers, professionals, and others interested in subjects like violence prevention, risk assessment, and safe working conditions, our findings emphasise that while these subjects are essential, other subjects or priorities are equally crucial, even in the face of fatal violent incidents. Notably, the influence of external elements surrounding an organisation and service cannot be overlooked. This knowledge needs to be incorporated into organisation development and learning, which is too often seen as an intra-organisational matter (Milch and Laumann, 2026). Research on violence prevention in the human service sector is limited, with a few exceptions (Andersen et al., 2019; Shier et al., 2019). More research is needed – regardless of perspective and starting point. Specific issues to be addressed are the ability to maintain priorities on violence prevention and safety issues over time in strongly politically influenced organisations. Such research would benefit from including the ability to keep up violence prevention priorities through organisational transitions.

9. Conclusion

This article has highlighted key findings from an in-depth study of a Norwegian human service organisation's response to violence from service users following the murder of an employee. The question of why organisational measures were successful and why they diminished has been discussed from an organisational perspective, contributing to a nuanced and accurate picture of the organisation's events and affecting conditions. Findings showed that the perceived effective measures were implemented, and a reduction in violence followed, partly attributed to service improvements. At the same time, the efforts to counteract violence at the upper administrative level of the organisation were characterised by a diminishing focus on violence prevention, the absence of violence prevention in the written plans for the new organisation and fragmentation. These development characteristics have been explained from both an internal and an external perspective. Internally, violence prevention was overshadowed by competing internal interests and goals, as other areas of concern were prioritised in favour of the work against violence, and several competing considerations had to be solved simultaneously. Externally, the influence was influenced by political leadership, which guides the organisation's development strategies. Secondly, the media affected the agenda of

politics and the public discourse by their focus on specific issues concerning conditions within NAV, leading the organisation to spend energy and resources on solving these issues to avoid distrust and legitimacy crises for both themselves and political stakeholders.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kurt Elvegård: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Stian Antonsen:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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