

Beyond Migration Background: How Race and Religion Matter for Integration Outcomes

Henrik Emilsson and Magdalena Ulcelușe

Abstract Sweden's reliance on country of birth as the primary measure of inequality reflects a universalist ideology but obscures important dynamics of exclusion that are better captured by considering race and religion alongside migration background. Using new diversity and equality data from Malmö, the study shows that country of birth best explains generational and structural aspects of integration, while race is the strongest predictor of discrimination and social recognition, and religion—particularly Muslim identity—adds an additional layer of symbolic exclusion. The findings demonstrate that migration background alone provides an incomplete picture of inequality, supporting the need for multidimensional, carefully designed equality data to better understand and address exclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Sweden has long been reluctant to collect or use equality data based on categories such as race and religion. This reluctance is rooted in a national ideology of universalism that views such classifications as incompatible with a society committed to equality and non-discrimination.¹ Over time, this stance has become embedded in legal frameworks, bureaucratic practices, and statistical conventions. As a result, migration background, typically measured through country of birth or parental origin, has become the dominant lens through which inequality and integration are analysed in Sweden.²

Yet, social research has shown that no single classification, whether based on migration background, race, or religion, can fully explain the complexity of inequality. Each lens captures distinct mechanisms: the structural legacies of migration histories, the social consequences of racialization, and the symbolic boundaries associated with religious belonging. Because these dimensions overlap and interact, examining them comparatively allows for a more nuanced

understanding of when, how, and why differences occur.

Country of birth and parental origin are widely used to capture integration trajectories and intergenerational mobility³. These indicators help identify patterns related to institutional access, language acquisition, and labour market incorporation. At the same time, birthplace-based categories can obscure substantial heterogeneity within foreign-born populations whose experiences differ depending on visible minority status, racialized stereotypes, or religious affiliation.

Research in critical race studies shows that race and processes of racialization structure experiences of discrimination, belonging, and recognition in ways that are not reducible to migration history.⁴ Two individuals may share the same country of birth yet be perceived and treated differently because of racial markers. Racial ascription therefore plays an important role in shaping exposure to discrimination, perceived national belonging, and social acceptance.

Similarly, a substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that religion, particularly minority religions such as Islam, forms an important basis for symbolic boundary-making, nationalist narratives, and stigmatization.⁵ Religious identity does not necessarily coincide with race or birthplace, yet it can strongly influence political attitudes, experiences of discrimination, and perceptions of cultural belonging.

Existing evidence therefore suggests that processes of racialization and religious boundary-making may structure social outcomes in ways not captured by migration-based proxies alone.⁶ However, most empirical studies examine these

dimensions separately and rarely compare their relative explanatory power within the same dataset. As a result, we know relatively little about when migration background, race, or religion provides the most meaningful lens for understanding differences in socio-economic outcomes, experiences of discrimination, and perceptions of belonging.

Against this background, this article examines whether it is analytically useful to incorporate race and religion alongside migration background in the study of inequality and integration. Using newly collected diversity and equality data from Malmö Sweden, we systematically compare the explanatory value of three classification systems—country of birth, race, and religion—to determine when, how, and why each category matters most.

More specifically, the study addresses three questions:

- When does migration background (such as country of birth) best explain differences in integration outcomes?
- When does racialization best explain differences in integration outcomes?
- When do religious identities best explain differences in integration outcomes?

This comparison also has implications for policy and public debate. Policymakers often rely on a single classification, typically migration background, to diagnose inequality. Yet if racialization or religious identity better predict experiences of discrimination or social exclusion, policy frameworks limited to “immigrant” versus “native-born” distinctions risk overlooking key mechanisms that generate inequality. By examining how these categories structure variation in socio-economic outcomes, perceptions, and experiences, this study contributes to broader discussions about how diversity is conceptualized and how integration is measured in contemporary societies.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

This study adopts an inductive, exploratory design to examine how three different classifications of the population—country of birth,

race, and religion—shape variation in socio-economic outcomes, experiences, and perceptions. Using the MIM Diversity Survey linked to register data, the analysis proceeds in two stages.

First, we examine descriptive patterns across the three classification systems for a range of outcomes, including labour market status, educational attainment, belonging and perceived Swedishness, institutional trust, experiences of discrimination, voting behaviour, and perceived social status (Figures 1–9). This step identifies empirically grounded patterns, such as whether discrimination is more strongly structured by racial categories or whether belonging varies more by religion or country of birth.

Second, these descriptive insights are examined using inferential statistical models to assess whether the observed patterns persist once other factors are taken into account. This allows us to evaluate the relative explanatory power of the three classification systems while controlling for country of birth, religion, and relevant socioeconomic and demographic characteristics.

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

Figures 1–9 (in Annex 1) present the descriptive patterns across the three classification systems, country of birth, race, and religion, across a range of socio-economic outcomes, experiences, and perceptions. Overall, the results suggest that each classification captures different dimensions of integration and inequality, and their importance varies depending on the outcome considered.

Country of birth appears most strongly associated with generational aspects of integration. Differences between the foreign-born, the second generation, and the Swedish-born are most visible in outcomes related to political participation (fig 7) and sense of belonging (fig 9). In particular, voting and feelings of belonging to the city follow a clear generational pattern, with the Swedish-born with Swedish parents reporting the highest levels and the foreign-born the lowest.

Race shows the strongest patterns in outcomes related to discrimination and social recognition.

Visible minority groups, particularly respondents categorized as Black and Middle Eastern, report substantially higher levels of discrimination in both employment and healthcare (figs 4 and 6). The largest disparities in the descriptive results also appear in perceptions of being seen as Swedish (fig 5), where visible minorities report dramatically lower levels of recognition as Swedish compared to White respondents. These differences persist even among individuals born in Sweden, suggesting that racialization shapes social perception independently of migration background.

Religion also captures important patterns, particularly in relation to discrimination and perceived inclusion. Muslims consistently report higher levels of discrimination and markedly lower levels of being perceived as Swedish than both Christians and the non-religious (figs 4-6). These differences indicate that religious identity constitutes an additional boundary shaping experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

By contrast, socio-economic outcomes such as employment (fig 2) and perceptions of social status (fig 8) show comparatively smaller differences across all three classifications. Educational attainment displays more variation (fig 1), but the gaps are larger across racial and religious categories than across country-of-birth groups.

Taken together, the descriptive results indicate that the three classification systems illuminate different mechanisms of inequality. Country of birth primarily captures generational and structural aspects of integration, race highlights disparities related to discrimination and social recognition, and religion reveals additional boundaries linked to cultural inclusion and stigma. These patterns suggest that migration background alone cannot account for variation in several key outcomes, particularly discrimination and perceived belonging.

The next section examines whether these descriptive patterns persist once other socio-economic and demographic characteristics are taken into account through statistical analysis.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The regression analysis (in Annex 2) examines whether the descriptive patterns remain when other factors—such as age, education, income, employment, language, and neighbourhood—are taken into account. In other words, the analysis tests whether race, country of birth, and religion still matter once we compare individuals with similar socioeconomic characteristics.

The results show that the importance of each classification system varies depending on the outcome considered.

For discrimination when searching for work, race emerges as the most consistent explanatory factor. Individuals belonging to racialized minority groups report significantly higher levels of discrimination than majority-group respondents, even after controlling for socioeconomic characteristics. This indicates that differences in discrimination cannot be explained simply by education, employment, or income. Instead, they appear to be linked to how individuals are perceived based on visible or socially recognized markers of racial difference. In contrast, country of birth does not strongly predict discrimination once other factors are taken into account. However, individuals born in Sweden to foreign-born parents still report higher levels of discrimination, suggesting that experiences of exclusion persist even among the second generation. Religion shows weaker and more selective effects, indicating that it matters in some cases but does not explain discrimination as consistently as race.

For perceptions of being seen as Swedish, both country of birth and race play important roles. Foreign-born individuals and those born in Sweden to foreign-born parents are much less likely to report being seen as Swedish than people with Swedish-born parents. At the same time, racialized groups—including Middle Eastern, Latin American, Asian, and mixed respondents—also report significantly lower levels of perceived Swedishness, even when socioeconomic and demographic factors are similar. This suggests that visible markers associated with racialization shape perceptions of

national belonging beyond migration background alone. Religion, by contrast, does not appear to have an independent effect once other factors are taken into account. What initially appears as a religious difference is largely explained by migration background, racialization, and language use.

For trust in the Swedish legal system, the pattern is different. Trust varies more by generation and socioeconomic factors than by race. Individuals born in Sweden to foreign-born parents consistently report lower trust than those with Swedish-born parents, even when controlling for other characteristics. Higher education, older age, and higher income are associated with greater trust in institutions. Race does not show a strong or consistent effect overall, although some differences appear for specific groups, such as respondents categorized as Latin American. Religion shows a modest effect, with some religious groups reporting slightly higher levels of trust, but these differences are relatively small.

Taken together, the regression results reinforce the conclusions from the descriptive analysis. Race appears to be the strongest predictor of discrimination, country of birth plays a larger role in shaping institutional trust and generational differences, and both race and country of birth influence perceptions of being seen as Swedish. Religion plays a more limited and context-specific role across the outcomes examined.

These findings suggest that relying only on migration background provides an incomplete picture of inequality and social integration. Different analytical categories capture different mechanisms, and combining them allows for a more nuanced understanding of how inequality and social recognition are structured.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to examine whether Sweden's prevailing reliance on country of birth as the primary lens for understanding socio-economic and political outcomes is sufficient, or whether incorporating race and religion provides a clearer account of how these outcomes are produced.

Drawing on newly collected diversity and equality data, the results show that each analytical category captures distinct mechanisms of inequality. Treating migration background as a stand-alone proxy obscures important dynamics of exclusion and recognition that become visible when race and religion are also taken into account.

Country of birth appears most closely associated with structural and generational aspects of integration. Differences in employment, education, and political participation largely follow patterns linked to migration background and generational position. In this sense, country of birth remains a useful indicator for understanding integration trajectories and socio-economic incorporation.

Race, however, emerges as the most powerful lens for understanding disparities in discrimination and social recognition. Racialized minorities, particularly respondents categorized as Middle Eastern and Black, report substantially higher levels of discrimination and markedly lower levels of being perceived as Swedish. Importantly, these differences persist even among individuals born in Sweden, indicating that racialization shapes experiences of belonging and exclusion independently of migration status.

Religion introduces an additional layer of differentiation. Muslim respondents in particular report weaker symbolic inclusion and higher exposure to labour market discrimination. These patterns suggest that religious boundaries operate alongside processes of racialization rather than merely reflecting them.

At the same time, not all outcomes are structured primarily by race or religion. Trust in legal institutions appears more strongly associated with generation and socioeconomic position than with racial or religious categories. This highlights that no single classification dominates across all domains of social life.

Taken together, these findings speak directly to Sweden's colourblind tradition. Avoiding race and religion as analytical categories does not neutralize the social salience of racialization and religious boundary-making. Instead, it risks rendering these

dynamics less visible in public statistics and policy analysis. If the aim is to diagnose and reduce unequal treatment, policy frameworks based solely on distinctions between “immigrant” and “native-born” populations overlook important mechanisms that shape inequality.

This does not imply that country of birth should be abandoned as an analytical category. Rather, it suggests that it should be complemented by carefully designed equality data. Voluntary and self-identified measures of race/ethnicity and religion, collected with strong privacy protections, would allow researchers and policymakers to develop a more nuanced understanding of the factors shaping socio-economic outcomes, discrimination, and belonging.

Future research should extend these findings by deepening intersectional analyses, exploring the mechanisms linking racialization and religious boundary-making to specific institutional contexts, and replicating these analyses in other municipalities and national surveys. Without such multidimensional measurement, Sweden risks mistaking the limits of its categories for the limits of inequality itself.

This article is accompanied by a [visualisation](#) that conveys its main message. The visualisation was created by Oscar Franzén, BA student in Visual Communication at Malmö University, in collaboration with the authors.

Author bio Henrik Emilsson is an Associate Professor at Malmö University. His research focuses on migration and integration policy, with a particular emphasis on why states design their policies the way they do, and the consequences these policies have. His current work examines Sweden's policy choices in the field of migration, specifically, why the country pursued a generous approach for a long time, only to shift course significantly within a relatively short period. Email: Henrik.emilsson@mau.se

Author bio Magdalena Ulcelușe is an Assistant Professor in International Migration and Ethnic Relations at Malmö University's Institute for Studies of Migration. She has previously held positions at the University of Groningen and Central European University, and has held research fellowships at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, the International Migration Institute in Oxford, the University of Amsterdam and the Central European Labour Studies Institute in Bratislava. Her research interests include intra-EU mobility, migration and socio-spatial inequality, emigration and diaspora relations, and the local governance of migration. Email: magdalena.ulcelușe@mau.se

¹ Antoine, K. (2022). The Swedish disconnect: Racism, white supremacy, and race. *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies*, 1(2), 92–104.

² Hübinette, T., Lundström, C., & Wikström, P. (2023). Introduction. In T. Hübinette, C. Lundström, & P. Wikström, *Race in Sweden* (pp. 1–11). Routledge.

³ Alba, R. D., & Foner, N. (2015). *Strangers no more: Immigration and the challenges of integration in North America and Western Europe*. Princeton University Press; Heath, A. F., & Cheung, S. Y. (Eds). (2007). *Unequal chances: Ethnic minorities in Western labour markets*. British Academy.

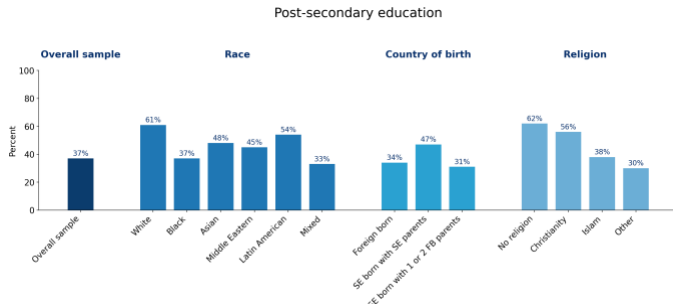
⁴ Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). Rethinking Racism: Toward a structural interpretation. *American Sociological Review*, 62(3), 465–480; Omi, M., & Winant, H. (2015). *Racial formation in the United States*. Routledge.

⁵ Cesari, J. (2013). *Why the West fears Islam: An exploration of Muslims in liberal democracies* (1st ed). Palgrave Macmillan; Koopmans, R. (2015). Religious Fundamentalism and Hostility against Out-groups: A Comparison of Muslims and Christians in Western Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41(1), 33–57.

⁶ Brubaker, R. (2013). Categories of analysis and categories of practice: A note on the study of Muslims in European countries of immigration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(1), 1–8; Mulinari, D., & Neergaard, A. (2017). *Theorising racism: Exploring the Swedish racial regime*. 7(2), 88–96; Wimmer, A. (2013). *Ethnic boundary making: Institutions, power, networks*. Oxford University Press.

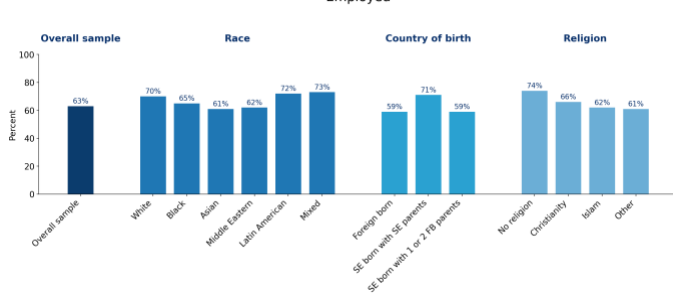
ANNEX 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Figure 1. Share of sample, by category, with post-secondary education



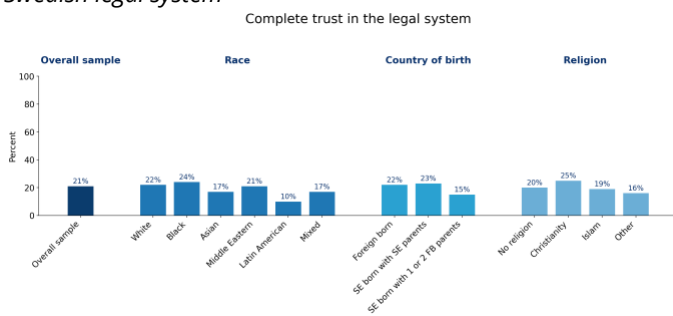
Source: MIM Diversity Survey, 2025

Figure 2. Share of sample, by category, in employment



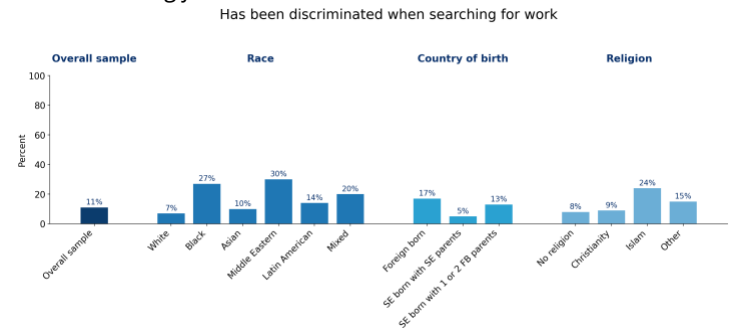
Source: MIM Diversity Survey, 2025

Figure 3. Share of sample, by category, that completely trusts the Swedish legal system



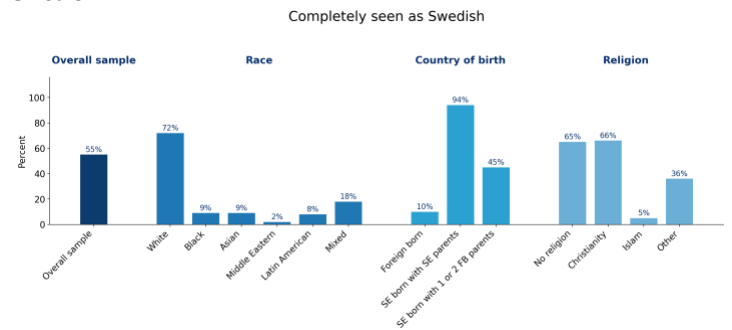
Source: MIM Diversity Survey, 2025

Figure 4. Share of sample, by category, that has been discriminated when searching for work



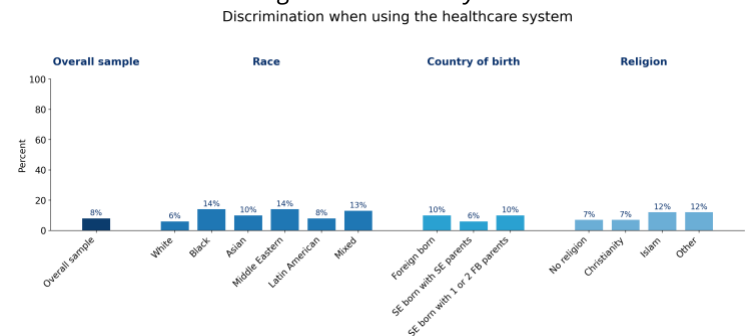
Source: MIM Diversity Survey, 2025

Figure 5. Share of sample, by category, that is completely seen as Swedish



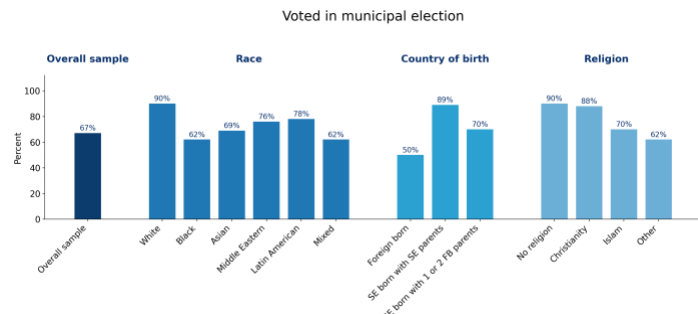
Source: MIM Diversity Survey, 2025

Figure 6. Share of sample, by category, that has experienced discrimination when using the healthcare system



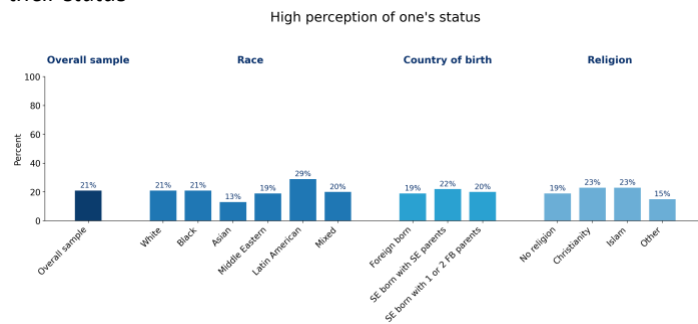
Source: MIM Diversity Survey, 2025

Figure 7. Share of sample, by category, that has voted in municipal elections



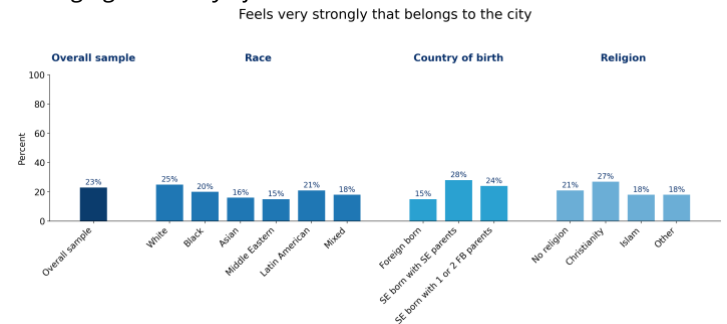
Source: MIM Diversity Survey, 2025

Figure 8. Share of sample, by category, with a high perception of their status



Source: MIM Diversity Survey, 2025

Figure 9. Share of sample, by category, that feels a strong sense of belonging to the city of Malmö



Source: MIM Diversity Survey, 2025