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Research and data infrastructure in social policy making: the case of Finland – an update to the 2023 DIFIS study

AT A GLANCE

- Social policymaking in Finland has corporatist features, especially as regards earnings-related benefits. Central labour market organisations and the government are involved in decision-making. Recent changes have weakened the impacts of corporatism on social policy.
- The state has several research and development organisations which contribute to social policy decision-making with research, data and consultancy. Research institutes linked to labour market organisations have similar functions. Social policy research is practised in universities and in some third-sector organisations. The Research Council of Finland, as well as other foundations, ministries, and the EU, provide project financing.
- Developed data infrastructures are available. There are advanced databases which utilise register data from various administrations and sample surveys, which are often interlinked. Macro- and microsimulation models and hybrids are used in forecasting future developments and in examining the effects of planned reforms.
- There are various ways to organise the link between decision-making and research, and more and less successful solutions.

ABSTRACT GERMAN

Dieser Beitrag beschreibt die Rolle der Forschung bei der Gestaltung der Sozialpolitik in Finnland. Forschung wird sowohl im akademischen Bereich als auch in sozial- und wirtschaftspolitischen Organisationen betrieben.

Die Dateninfrastrukturen für die sozialpolitischen Forschung haben im Laufe der Jahre erhebliche Fortschritte gemacht. Statistiken, Verwaltungsregister und Erhebungen sind die wichtigsten Datenquellen. Daten aus unterschiedlichen Quellen werden häufig über persönliche Identifikationsnummern miteinander verknüpft. Statistische Mikro- und Makromodelle werden bei der langfristigen Planung und bei der Abschätzung der erwarteten Ergebnisse sozialpolitischer Reformpläne eingesetzt.

Vier aktuelle sozialpolitische Reformen veranschaulichen den Einsatz und das Zusammenspiel von Forschung und Entscheidungsfindung. Sie zeigen sowohl erfolgreiche als auch weniger erfolgreiche Beispiele für die Koordinierung von Forschung und Entscheidungsfindung bei sozialpolitischen Reformen. Es gibt keine einzig beste Lösung für die Verknüpfung von Forschung und Entscheidungsfindung.

ABSTRACT ENGLISH

This paper describes the role of research in social policymaking in Finland. Research is conducted both in academia and in social and economic policy organisations.

Data infrastructures in social policy research have made significant strides over the years. Statistics, administrative registers and surveys are the main sources of data. Records are often interlinked by personal identification numbers. Statistical micro- and macro models are used in long-term planning and in analysing the results of planned policy reforms.

Four recent social policy reforms illustrate the use and interplay of research and decision-making. They reveal both successful and less successful examples of the coordination of research and decision-making in social policy reforms. There is no single best solution for linking research and decision-making.

1 Introduction

This update to the 2023 study describes the support structures of social policymaking in Finland (Uusitalo 2023). The key focus is the institutional setting of research, the main social policy research institutes, and social policy data sources. Both current and earlier developments are considered. Section 2 describes the general framework of social policy decision-making in Finland. It describes the role of central labour market organisations in social policy and outlines the main features of the Finnish political landscape. It also examines the major tools of policy making, particularly the role of Government Programmes. Section 3 discusses the main social policy research organisations in the public and private sectors, as well as the role of academic research. This section also introduces the key financing organisations of social policy research. Section 4 focuses on main data infrastructures, and on macro-, micro- and hybrid models used in social policy research. Section 5 builds on these sections by presenting four social policy reform case studies, the focus being on the ways research is used. Section 6 draws together the main conclusions.

2 Social policy making in the 2020s

2.1. THE LEGACY OF SOCIAL CORPORATISM

The Nordic countries - Sweden, often regarded as the prototype (Furniss und Tilton 1977), followed by Denmark and Norway, with Finland as a later entrant, have long been identified as a particular type of society among advanced democracies. In his influential book, Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990) developed three types of welfare capitalism, one of which is the social democratic welfare state, commonly associated with Scandinavia. There is a broad consensus that public and social policies in these countries exhibit strong family resemblances. Although terminology varies, labels such as the 'Nordic model' or the 'Scandinavian welfare state' are widely used. While interpretations differ in the precise delineation of the model, its core elements typically include broad-ranging public participation in economic and social life, a universalistic approach to social policy, and a strong emphasis on egalitarianism, both as a normative value and as an organising principle of public services and institutions (Erikson et al. 1987).

In political science, some features of this model are described as social corporatism. This refers to tripartite decision-making structures involving collective bargaining between representatives of employers, labour, and government. These structures encompass decision-making across a broad range of issues, including many social policies. This form of social corporatism developed after World War II, influenced by Christian and social democrats in Western European countries such as Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The Nordic countries exhibit some of the most comprehensive systems of collective bargaining. In recent decades, these collective bargaining features have weakened (Götz 2019).

In Finland, the corporatist structure flourished particularly between 1969 and 2006, when comprehensive income policy agreements were concluded. These were tripartite agreements between the central organisations of trade unions, employers' organisations, and government. They covered a wide range of economic and political issues: wages, taxes, pensions, unemployment benefits, and broader social policy reforms. After this period, labour market agreements have taken various forms. In recent years, the employers have decentralised their negotiation practises to industry-level associations and, in some cases, to the firm level. Although membership rates among employers and employees are high, there are signs of decline. The self-employed are highly organised in sectors such as agriculture but much less so in others.

However, the corporatist features are still important, especially in earnings-related benefits, while so-called basic benefits (where entitlement is based on residency in Finland) primarily fall within parliamentary politics. In any case, social security benefits - both earnings-related and basic - are established through legislation and therefore require the involvement of both government and parliament.

2.2. POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

There are nine political parties in the Finnish Parliament (eduskunta). In the 2023 elections, the National Coalition Party (conservatives) secured 48 seats (+10 compared to the 2019 elections), followed by the Finns Party (right-wing populists) with 46 seats (+7) and the Social Democratic Party with 43 seats (+3). The Centre Party won 23 seats (-8), the Green League 13 (-7) and the Left Alliance 11 (-5). The remaining seats were taken by the Swedish People's Party with 9 (± 0) and the Christian Democrats with 5 (± 0), with Movement Now securing the remaining seat (± 0). The parliament has 16 permanent special committees and a Grand Committee, which mainly focuses on EU affairs. From the social policy perspective, the most important committee is the Social Affairs and Health Committee, which deals with matters relating to social welfare and healthcare, social insurance, fees for social welfare and healthcare services, pension legislation, and environmental healthcare.

In recent decades, Finland has been governed by parliamentary majority governments, often transcending the left-right divide. However, the two most recent majority governments reflect the continuing importance of this divide in Finnish politics. The current government, led by Petteri Orpo (2023–2027), is a right-wing coalition formed by the National Coalition, the Finns Party, the Swedish People's Party and the Christian Democrats. The previous government, led by Sanna Marin (2019–2023), was a red-green coalition, formed by Social Democrats, the Centre Party, the Greens, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People's Party. This shift from a red-green to a right-wing government has brought significant changes in social policy.

The current government consists of 19 ministers. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has two ministers and is responsible for the preparation and implementation of social welfare and healthcare policy, gender equality, and occupational safety and health. Under the ministry, there are two independent research and development agencies that provide expertise in social and health policy (see Section 3).

2.3. GOVERNMENT PROGRAMME

The Government Programme is the key political document for the forthcoming years. Before parliamentary elections, proposals for the Government Programme are prepared by political parties, the state administration, regional and municipal organisations, interest organisations, central labour market organisations, and other civil society organisations. On the basis of their election programmes and these proposals, parties participating in government negotiations compile a negotiated policy programme, often after prolonged negotiations.

The socio-economic situation in the 2020s

Finland's economy has experienced a prolonged period of weak growth since 2008, due to the global financial crisis, the collapse of Nokia-led electronics exports, demographic ageing, and persistently low productivity growth. In 2008, GDP per capita was higher than in 2023. Public policy debate has increasingly focused on weak growth, labour market performance, and high levels of public deficit and public debt. During this period, a particularly important agenda-setter for Government Programme negotiations has been the Ministry of Finance, whose concerns regarding the public deficit and the need to balance public finances, primarily through austerity measures, have been at the forefront of the political debate. There is a broad consensus that Finland should bring its public finances into balance but the means of achieving this vary, as the programmes of the last two governments demonstrate.

Programmes of the last two governments

The Government Programme sets out the government's main objectives and policy instruments. Government Programmes are not only important but also serve as detailed frameworks for government action. The programme of the Petteri Orpo government is 250 pages long. The programme sets out measures to promote employment and growth, strengthen work incentives and implement cuts to social security alongside structural reforms. These measures are to be implemented in a way that does not jeopardise the position of the most vulnerable groups.

This is in contrast to the fiscal and social policies of the previous Sanna Marin government. It pursued expansionary fiscal policies, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and increased public spending on healthcare, employment services and education. The labour market policies of Marin's government built on tripartite cooperation between labour market actors and the state, focusing on employment services and training while leaving unemployment benefits largely unchanged. The Orpo Government Programme includes reforms to reduce the role of social corporatism such as promoting local bargaining, tightening industrial peace legislation, and restricting eligibility for unemployment benefits. These measures aim to increase labour supply and improve competitiveness. A similar contrast can be observed in social security policies. The Marin government introduced several benefit increases, strengthened social safety nets during the pandemic and emphasised the need to reduce inequality, while the Orpo government aims to make social security more incentive-based and to reduce welfare dependency (Finnish Government 2019; 2023).

To summarise, the Orpo government represents a radical departure from the social policies of the previous red-green coalition. At its mid-term policy review session in April 2025, the

government reaffirmed its commitment to its programme, assessed progress and future prospects, and adopted additional measures to achieve its objectives. (Finnish Government 2025).

As regards research, development, and innovation (RDI) policies, there is a broad parliamentary consensus that RDI constitutes a national priority. RDI is seen as essential for productivity, competitiveness, the green transition and technological sovereignty. As a share of GDP, public sector R&D expenditure is currently about 3%, compared to 4% in 2009. (Research Council of Finland 2024). Both governments are committed to increasing RDI funding back to 4% of GDP in 2030 and to supporting predictable, long-term funding growth. However, general austerity measures aimed at curbing the growth of public and social expenditures have also affected universities and research institutes.

While the strategic direction of RDI policies under these two governments is similar, their policy framing and emphasis differ. The Orpo government links RDI to competitiveness, improvements in the operating environment for companies, industrial renewal, and national and comprehensive security, whereas the Marin government emphasised RDI as being a part of the green transition, welfare state renewal, public sector-driven innovation and equality in access to research and education.

A further similarity lies in efforts to improve the use and usability of research in public policymaking. The Orpo government aims to improve the use of research in decision-making by establishing predictable, long-term R&D funding structures, defining national strategic priorities that align research with societal needs, strengthening impact assessment and monitoring, and strengthening the role of the Research and Innovation Council, chaired by the Prime Minister. This is intended to improve coordination in the use of scientific evidence across ministries by integrating research into economic, security, and competitiveness policies.

During the four-year electoral period, governments often face unforeseen changes in domestic and international contexts that require policy responses. The Marin cabinet faced the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These events led to significant policy responses, including pandemic management measures and a rapid application to join NATO, taken with broad consensus among Government, the President, and Parliament, with polls showing strong public support for the move. The Orpo government has faced economic uncertainties both in Finland and globally, as well as political pressure to increase defence expenditure. These developments have not diminished the significance of the Government Programme.

Impact assessment of government proposals

From a research perspective, the guidelines for drafting government proposals are of central importance. These guidelines were renewed in 2022, and they are binding on all ministries. They require that every government proposal include an assessment of the effects of the reform on the economy, public administration, the environment, social issues, human rights, gender equality, and health and wellbeing, where relevant. The purpose of impact assessment is to strengthen the evidence base of legislative drafting and to provide decision-makers with the most reliable possible evaluation of the effects of different policy options. (Ministry of Justice 2026). The quality of impact assessment is monitored by the Chancellor of Justice, Parliament and public debate. Impact assessment has increased the demand for research and strengthened interaction between policymaking and research.

3 Main social policy R&D organisations

The Finnish research, development and innovation system consists of 14 universities, 24 universities of applied sciences, 12 government research institutes, and private-sector research and development units. The most important funding organisations are the Research Council of Finland, Business Finland and private foundations and funds. The Research and Innovation Council is chaired by the Prime Minister. It is an advisory body whose purpose is to develop research and innovation policy to support wellbeing, education and economically, socially and ecologically sustainable growth and competitiveness.

R&D organisations are involved, to varying degrees, in the social policy infrastructure in Finland. These include state authorities which have research as one of their functions, semi-public institutions, research institutes of labour market organisations, universities, and institutions that fund scientific and applied research. The development and maintenance of data infrastructure are partly a joint effort of various authorities (see Section 4).

3.1. PUBLIC RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATIONS

Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare

The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) was founded in 2009 through the merger of two R&D institutions, the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) and the National Public Health Institute. THL is a state-owned, independent expert and research institute operating within the administrative umbrella of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Its duties are established in legislation and include carrying out research and expert work to prevent illness and social problems, developing the welfare state, and supporting social welfare, healthcare and social security systems. THL is also a statistical authority responsible for maintaining and developing statistics and registers in its field. It oversees national information management in social welfare and healthcare services, including the health and welfare data of Finnish citizens. In addition to the government, THL provides services to municipal and regional decision-makers, actors in the social welfare and health sector, organisations, the research community, and the general public. Furthermore, it provides social and healthcare services as well as forensic medicine services for which the state is responsible (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2026). The role of THL in the management of the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020-22 was highly significant, both due to its duties as a public authority and as a research institute providing up-to-date scientific knowledge to decision-makers and the public. In 2023, Orpo's Government gave THL the task to produce an annual, independent "State of the Nation's Wellbeing" report.

In 2024, THL had approximately 1,300 staff. About 20% of staff hold research qualifications, and 57% have completed higher education. THL's funding is derived from the state budget, co-funded activities, and fee-based services. In 2024, its total funding was about € 131m, of which about 80% was provided by the state. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2026).

THL conducts research on the health and welfare of the population, social issues, and the functioning of the social and healthcare system. It currently operates three broad research programmes: The Future of Health and Wellbeing, Equal and Effective Social and Health Services, and A Sustainable and Safe Society. Approximately 30 research professors are employed at THL. THL currently runs nearly 200 RDI projects. More than 50 projects are funded by the EU, and about 25 projects by the Research Council of Finland and the Strategic Research Council. Approximately 900 peer-reviewed articles are published annually, more than 700 of which appear in international journals.

THL is the principal producer of social welfare and health statistics in Finland. These statistics are crucial for decision-making, development and research. Key statistical domains include alcohol, substance abuse, coronavirus cases, disability, health and welfare promotion, healthcare services, morbidity, populations with a foreign background, sexual and reproductive health, social and healthcare resources and social services for all population groups. Most of THL's statistics, datasets and databases are available as open, machine-readable data. Several statistical databases are available for use at national, regional, and municipal levels (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2026).

Findata, which operates in conjunction with THL, is the authority that grants permits for the secondary use of social and health data where data from several public social and health sector organisations are needed. Findata is responsible for combining and pre-processing data covered by a permit, including the production of pseudonymised and anonymised statistical data. In 2024, more than 300 permits were granted (Findata 2025).

THL manages several extensive research data resources, ranging from register studies and population-based surveys to sample collections held in the THL Biobank. THL provides external researchers with access to its data for various health and biomedical research purposes. THL's register data includes national individual-level data collected over the past 50 years from Finnish healthcare and social services. It provides access to statistical information on a wide range of diseases, treatments and services, which can be linked with data from other sources. The most widely used THL registers currently include the Care Register for Health Care, the Cancer Registry, and the Medical Birth Register.

Population-based surveys are based on longitudinal follow-up of random samples drawn from the population. They include information obtained from questionnaires (typically covering various health, diet, and lifestyle factors), objective health examination and a collection of biological samples.

The THL Biobank hosts population- and disease-specific samples for research purposes. Biobanking ensures access to samples and data, provides sample management and distribution services, and maintains databases and standardised information management for sample collections.

As a form of quality assurance, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has commissioned several international evaluations of RDI institutions. The latest audit report in 2023 concluded that THL is a world-leading institution in its field, yet faces several challenges: budgetary constraints, increasing complexity, including major reform of health and social services, and the rapid evolution of data science. THL must continue to strengthen its role in national health security and pandemic preparedness. The audit made several recommendations (International Evaluation Group 2023).

Finnish Institute of Occupational Health

The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) is an expert and research organisation that focuses on health and wellbeing at work, providing research, advisory services, and training. Its goal is to develop positive work communities and safe work environments. Like THL, FIOH operates under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and is an independent institution governed by law. FIOH has approximately 500 employees, with a budget of € 50m. Approximately half of its activities are funded by the state budget, around a quarter by business activities and about a fifth by research funding bodies. It provides laboratory and occupational hygiene services, as well as development and consultation, training, online coaching and patient services related to occupational medicine. It has about 130 research and development projects, and a research budget of about € 10m (Finnish Institute for Occupational Health 2025). FIOH was evaluated by an international evaluation group in 2014.

The Social Insurance Institution of Finland

Kela, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland, provides social security for residents of Finland. It administers residence-based flat-rate and means-tested benefits: family benefits, health insurance, rehabilitation, basic unemployment security, social assistance, housing benefits, student financial aid, disability benefits and basic pensions. Kela operates under the supervision of Parliament but remains operationally independent. (Kela 2025).

Kela has a research unit that conducts topical, interdisciplinary research on social security and health insurance policy. Its current research programme (2026–2028) focuses on major changes and reductions in the social security system. The programme examines three broad themes: sustainable health insurance; income across different life situations; and functional capacity, work ability and rehabilitation. Its research is based on Kela's benefit registers, combined with other register data, surveys, interviews and observational data. (Kela 2026).

Kela's research unit employs around 50 researchers, representing disciplines such as pharmacy, medicine and public health, rehabilitation, economics, and social sciences. Its research budget is about € 4.5m. One important example of Kela's research, the basic income experiment, is described in Section 5. Kela also funds research on social and health insurance and rehabilitation at universities and research institutes.

Kela's administrative functions form the basis of registers, databases, and statistics, which are crucial not only for Kela's information management but for social and health policy. Databases and research are made available via Kela's Info Tray.

Finnish Centre for Pensions

The earnings-related pension system is a classic example of corporatist social policy in Finland. It was established in the 1960s and early 1970s in negotiations between central labour market organisations and the state. The earnings-related schemes are agreed by these parties, planned in detail by tripartite committees and working groups, and legislated in Parliament. They cover virtually all employees in both private and public sectors, as well as the self-employed in agriculture and other sectors. The administration of the earnings-related pension system is decentralised to earnings-related pension providers, who are responsible for granting and paying earnings-related pensions and for advising insured persons on pension matters. Unified pension legislation defines pension entitlements, regardless of the pension provider.

Due to the decentralised nature of the system, its common functions are handled by the Finnish Centre for Pensions (ETK). ETK coordinates and promotes the implementation and development of earnings-related pension schemes, promotes cooperation between pension institutions and the authorities, and issues recommendations to pension institutions on the

application of the laws. ETK's costs are covered by pension contributions of employers, employees and the self-employed. ETK is a semi-public organisation. It does not fall under the administration of any ministry and its staff are not employed by the state but its operations are regulated by law.

ETK's mandate includes conducting research, producing statistics and maintaining registers. It conducts independent empirical research in social and economic sciences. Its current research programme (2025–2029) defines four key research areas: working careers; transitioning to retirement; pension adequacy; and the financial sustainability of the pension system. Special attention is paid to the impacts of pension reforms and policy measures, pension differences between population groups, and international comparisons (Finnish Centre for Pensions 2026d).

As in the case of Kela, ETK's administrative functions generate extensive data on pensions and their financing. ETK produces statistics on pension recipients, insured persons, pension expenditure, effective retirement ages, rehabilitation and financing of earnings-related pensions (Finnish Centre for Pensions 2026e). Statistics on both national and earnings-related pensions are produced jointly by Kela and ETK (Statistical Yearbook of Pensioners in Finland 2024).

ETK's services for pension policy decision-makers include assessments of planned reforms, as well as calculations and projections concerning the future of the pension system. The time frame ranges from short-term analyses to long-term projections extending 60–70 years ahead. These functions constitute an important tool for planning the Finnish pension system. Section 5 presents a case illustrating the use of these services. ETK's research, statistics, projections, and planning functions employed 50 persons, with costs amounting to € 5m in 2024.

VATT Institute for Economic Research

VATT operates within the administrative domain of the Ministry of Finance. It conducts research to promote evidence-based policy making and evaluates the effects of policy measures. It also acts as an expert body supporting decision-making and evaluating economic policy. VATT's operating expenditure is approximately € 6-7m. Two thirds of its funding comes from the state budget and one third comes from competitively tendered research funding. It has a staff of around 60. Most researchers hold doctoral degrees in various subfields of economics. VATT focuses on several research areas, including social security, taxation, healthcare services and inequality (VATT Institute for Economic Research 2026a).

One notable recent initiative is VATT's Data Room. It was established in 2024 as an independent unit within VATT. It originated during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which created a need for rapid analyses based on up-to-date register data. The Data Room primarily responds to current government information needs by combining unit-level register data across administrative branches. It comprises more than 100 datasets (VATT Institute for Economic Research 2026b).

Another independent but administratively linked organisation is the Economic Policy Council. It was established in 2014 to provide independent evaluations of economic policy objectives and the effectiveness of policy measures. Its purpose is to improve the quality of economic policy decision-making and preparation, and to bring an independent and research-based perspective to public debate on economic policy. Members of the council are appointed by the Ministry of Finance on the basis of the proposals made by university economics departments and the Research Council of Finland. In 2026, the council's role was expanded from assessing economic and financial policy to overseeing fiscal policy, in line with the EU's

revised fiscal rules. Its reports address social policy in relation to public economy issues (Economic Policy Council 2026). For example, in its 2026 annual report, it discussed the financial challenges facing district health services and suggested possible solutions. It also questioned whether pensions should be excluded from social benefit cuts, and proposed alternative approaches to reforming pension entitlements to achieve this (Talouspolitiikan arviointineuvosto 2026).

3.2. PRIVATE SECTOR RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

The main central labour market organisations have their own research institutes. They primarily focus on economic research. As with public research organisations, their research is independent and conforms to scientific standards. These organisations also contribute to economic and social policy debate and planning by contributing expertise to various committees and working groups set up by government departments, by participating in parliamentary committee hearings, and by giving presentations at scientific conferences and participating in public discussions, interviews, and hearings.

Etla Economic Research

Etla is an independent, private, non-profit economic research institute. It conducts applied economic research on key issues affecting Finnish business and the national economy. Its members are organisations representing Finnish employers. Membership fees covered about one third of total expenditure in 2024, which amounted to approximately € 4.5m (Etla 2026b). The remaining two thirds is obtained as project funding for various research projects. Etla employs approximately 40 staff, most of research staff hold doctorate degrees in economics. Research focuses on labour markets and education, economic growth, international trade and competition, macroeconomics and public finances, and business renewal (Etla 2026a). Etla's research has been particularly important in pension policy reforms (see Section 5).

Labour Institute for Economic Research LABORE

LABORE is an independent, non-profit research organisation that conducts applied economic research. Its supporting organisations include central and other organisations of labour unions, representing both blue-collar and white-collar employees. Its budget in 2024 was € 2.7m, and it employs about 30 staff. LABORE's research focuses on labour economics, including education, public finances, macroeconomics and social policy. (LABORE 2026).

Pellervo Economic Research PTT

Pellervo Economic Research is an independent, non-profit applied economics research institute. PTT's members consist of organisations in the agri-food and forest management sectors, including the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners. PTT has about 30 employees and an annual budget of about € 3m (Pellervon taloustutkimus 2025). PTT's research is policy-oriented and focuses on the national economy, regional economies, agriculture, the food economy, forestry, environmental economy and housing markets (Pellervo Economic Research 2026). In its research profile, social policy issues (excluding regional problems) are less prominent than in Etla and LABORE.

SOSTE Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health

SOSTE is the Finnish umbrella organisation for more than 250 social affairs and health NGOs, as well as dozens of partner members. Its goal is to strengthen the impact of social and healthcare organisations in society and promote conditions that enable a good life for all. It operates regionally, nationally and internationally. SOSTE promotes sustainable development that balances environmental, economic, and social considerations; the reduction of poverty, social exclusion, and inequality; the promotion of health and wellbeing, including the Health in All Policies' approach; the promotion of the wellbeing economy approach; increased participation by people and organisations, and the strengthening of civil society (SOSTE 2026).

Since 1991, SOSTE has monitored the state and development of social and health services. Its Social Barometer is based on questionnaire surveys directed at experts in social, health and employment services, as well as in Kela. It aims to provide reliable information on public debate and to influence decision-making (SOSTE 2025). Another SOSTE tool, the Organisation Barometer, collects up-to-date information on the activities, operating conditions, and environments of social and health organisations and changes over time. It is based on surveys of leaders of national and local associations, and on statistical and register data (Järjestöbarometri). Occasionally, SOSTE also conducts research on other social policy issues. For example, in 2023, it published a report using simulation methods to assess the effects of the cuts made by the Orpo Government on vulnerable population groups (Honkanen 2023).

Think tanks and lobby organisations

Finnish think tanks constitute a small but diverse set of organisations that contribute to public debate, policy development, and political idea formation. They include public, party-affiliated and independent third-sector actors. Their primary functions consist of producing research-based reports, organising seminars and expert discussions, and supporting long-term policy formulation within their respective ideological or thematic domains. These think tanks operate at the interface between research and decision-making. Their aim is to bring new ideas to societal and political discussion and to propose directions for decision-makers. To date, their overall impact has been limited. They have achieved greater impact through their publications (Kannisto 2019). Some of their work relates to social policy issues.

Although it is not focused on social policy issues, Sitra, the Finnish Innovation Fund, is worth mentioning. This fund operates under the supervision of the Parliament of Finland. It promotes and finances the renewal of Finland to improve wellbeing and accelerate economic growth within ecological limits. It prepares, for example, alternative scenarios for Finland's future, which may have implications for social policy (Sitra 2026).

3.3. ACADEMIC RESEARCH ON SOCIAL POLICY

Universities are autonomous legal entities but their core funding comes from the Ministry of Education and Culture. Six universities offer doctoral schools in social policy and carry out social policy research. The boundaries between social policy, public policy, sociology and the social sciences are fluid, making it difficult to portray the situation accurately. Also, disciplines such as economics, regional science and history occasionally address social policy issues.

Social policy research at universities is financed through core funding and, increasingly, external project financing. Key funding bodies for social policy research include the Research Council of Finland and private foundations, the EU, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, THL, and Kela. Research projects are often carried out in collaborative consortia.

As social policy research is predominantly conducted in the context of applied research and is often funded by institutions with vested interests, university-based social policy research is of crucial importance. It provides independent, critical, theoretically innovative and internationally connected research that complements the policy-driven work of applied research institutes. Academic research fosters innovation, maintains pluralism in public debate, and is essential for training future experts.

3.4. MAIN FINANCIERS OF SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH

Research Council of Finland

The Research Council of Finland (RCF), formerly the Academy of Finland, is an independent government agency under the Ministry of Education and Culture. RCF's research funding comes from the state budget and it grants funding in all scientific disciplines. It funds research and researcher training, promotes research utilisation and supports national and international collaboration in science. In 2024, RCF's research funding was € 543m, 5,214 new applications were submitted, and 634 new projects launched, corresponding to a success rate of 15%. This supported the research activities of up to 3,500 people at Finnish universities and research institutes. RCF uses international peer review panels to identify the most promising research projects, researchers, and research environments. It has five scientific councils: the Biosciences Council, the Health and Environment Council, the Social Sciences and Humanities Council, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Council, and the Council for Research Infrastructures. These councils recruit members from the Finnish scientific community (Research Council of Finland 2026).

The Research Council for Social Sciences and Humanities provides funding to many social and cultural sciences, including social policy. In 2024, social sciences funding amounted to approximately € 30m, representing about 6% of RCF's total funding (Suomen Akatemian tilinpäätös 2024). Only a small number of funded projects have an explicit social policy focus, while others have some relevance for social policy.

Within the RCF, the Council for Research Infrastructures provides funding to infrastructure projects and monitors funded projects. It has supported Finnish participation in the European Social Survey (ESS). ESS is an academically driven comparative social survey designed to chart and explain the interaction between Europe's changing societies and the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations. The ESS covers 39 countries (European Social Survey 2026).

Strategic Research Council

The Strategic Research Council (SRC) is an independent research funding body established in 2014. It operates within the Research Council of Finland. The SRC funds high-quality research and emphasises societal relevance and impact by addressing major challenges. SRC programmes run for 3–6 years. The SRC's annual budget is approximately € 55m (Strategic Research Council 2026). An important element of SRC research is active and ongoing collaboration between knowledge producers and knowledge users. The Government of Finland determines research priorities and defines the final themes. The SRC then prepares proposals on key strategic research themes and priorities, which are subject to approval by the Government of Finland.

Exceptionally, the Orpo government deviated from the usual procedure and did not approve one of the funding decisions proposed by the SRC in 2023. It considered one of the proposed projects to be inconsistent with its political priorities. This project focused on immigration, labour mobility, and integration structures. This exceptional decision triggered debate in the

research community about academic freedom, the independence of the SRC, and the limits of political guidance.

From the viewpoint of social policy, the most important programmes financed by the SRC focus on children and young people, equal society, health, well-being, and lifestyles (Strategic Research Council 2026). Research programmes typically involve large consortia with participants from several universities and representing various academic disciplines. Interestingly, the SRC is also responsible for assessing the impact of the research it has funded. As a relatively new instrument for integrating research into public policy, the overall impact of the SRC is yet to be seen.

Other research financing organisations

There are approximately 800 private grant providers, with the oldest dating from the 18th Century. The first foundations supporting the humanities and social sciences appeared after World War II. Funding for the sciences has increased rapidly since 1990 (Tiitta 2018, S. 177, 202, 225). In 2024, these organisations granted € 80m in funding for the social sciences and economics (Raivio and Saarinen 2025).

4 Main data infrastructures

Statistics Finland

As described in the previous section, THL, Kela and ETK, partly because of their duties as social security authorities, produce essential parts of social policy data infrastructure. The main data infrastructure producer is Statistics Finland, whose role extends far beyond social policy to all areas of society.

Statistics Finland is Finland's national statistical institute, which operates independently within the administrative sector of the Ministry of Finance. It processes data from multiple sources into statistical outputs and data products to support decision-making and for use by citizens, researchers and other stakeholders. Its activities are funded by the state budget, other central government authorities, the EU and fee-based services. Statistics Finland employs around 700 staff.

Statistics Finland plays a key role in maintaining registers and data infrastructure for a wide range of public and social policy purposes, as well as for commercial use. It produces statistics and data sets for such social policy uses as health, housing, income and consumption, living conditions and social protection. In addition to register-based data, Statistics Finland utilises population surveys. These can be linked to register data. This is made possible by the personal identity number given to every individual living permanently in Finland. It enables the combination of individual data from various registers and surveys to produce data sets for statistical and research purposes. The use of such data is strictly regulated to safeguard anonymity. These data sets are broadly accessible (with limitations referring to purpose and integrity), and can be analysed using statistical tools. Statistics

Finland uses internationally developed and agreed standards, and co-operates with international organisations such as Eurostat, the OECD, the UN, and others. This co-operation covers much of statistical production in Finland (Statistics Finland 2026a).

The Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD) provides access to a wide range of digital research data. It archives and disseminates research data for reuse. In 2024, it held more than 2,000 datasets and recorded approximately 50,000 downloads (Finnish Social Science Data Archive 2026). The most important survey data sets for social policy research are available through the FSD.

4.1. MACRO-LEVEL MODELS AND FORECASTS

The Ministry of Finance, the Bank of Finland, and several private sector organisations, including the above-mentioned economic research institutes, own macroeconomic models used primarily for short-term economic and fiscal policy analysis. Some of these models are also used in longer-term forecasts, in which case they utilise population forecasts.

In addition to the UN and Eurostat, Statistics Finland produces population projections for Finland. The current projection runs to 2075. It uses a demographic component model where the future population numbers and structures are calculated by means of age-specific birth rates, mortality, and migration coefficients. The coefficients are based on demographic statistics from recent few years (Statistics Finland 2024). These projections form the basis for other population forecasts. Several municipalities use population forecasts, as does Kela. In 2025, ETLA published its projections, which assumed net migration to be markedly lower than that of Statistics Finland. In addition to point forecasts, 80% prediction intervals were used, based on stochastic simulations (Alho & Valkonen 2025). Also, ETK uses stochastic scenarios in its forecasts (Tikanmäki et al. 2025).

Population forecasts form the basis for long-term forecasts of economic and social developments. THL produces long-term forecasts of social expenditures, Kela of residence-based expenditures and ETK of earnings-related pensions expenditures, financing and benefit levels. These models are also used to estimate the likely effects of planned policy changes. Section 5 describes one such example.

4.2. MICROSIMULATION MODELS

Microsimulation models provide an effective tool for economic and social policy research and planning. The first models were based on example household types using statistics of household economies and characteristics. Until 2011, there were three microsimulation models based on income distribution statistics and therefore enabling results to be generalised to the population level (Mikrosimulointimallien 2004). Today, there is one major simulation model, SISU, maintained by Statistics Finland together with Kela. It is used to estimate public sector tax revenues, to analyse the economic situation of individuals and households, and to study the effects of planned legislative changes on income differences and economic incentives.

SISU is a static microsimulation model. It does not account for behavioural responses to policy changes. The model can be used for both data simulation and synthetic data simulation. Synthetic data simulation can be used for certain types of persons or households generated by the user, by calculating taxes, benefits, and disposable income for them. In the data simulation, results can be generalised to the target population. The SISU model incorporates detailed legislation on taxation and social policy cash benefits in a very detailed way. For planning purposes, parameters can be adjusted, and the results of this exercise can be

compared to the outcomes caused by the prevailing legislation. The underlying data typically has one- or two-year lags but can be updated to reflect the current year and to five or six years into the future.

The SISU microsimulation model can be used for scientific research and statistical analyses within the framework of the Statistics Act. Restrictions apply to the underlying data but the actual model code is freely available. The model operates via remote access connection, and it has about 50 institutional users (Statistics Finland 2026b). For example, the information service of Parliament uses the model and produces modelling for MPs at their request (Grönberg et al. 2016).

While the SISU model is nationally the main simulation model, EUROMOD can be used for comparative analyses. EUROMOD is a tax-benefit microsimulation model for the European Union. It is maintained, developed, and managed by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission, in collaboration with Eurostat and national teams from EU Member States. Cross-country comparability is enabled by coding the policy systems of the EU Member States according to a common framework based on a standard set of modelling conventions (European Commission 2026).

ETK operates a microsimulation model, ELSI, which focuses on pensions. It is used to forecast the long-term development of Finnish earnings-related pensions and national and guarantee pensions. It complements ETK's long-term planning model by employing individual-level data to simulate the life course of individuals. The population modelled by ELSI includes all adults who are covered by the Finnish social security system and those who have previously accrued earnings-related pension payments under the Finnish pension system. The input data is based on administrative registers (Finnish Centre of Pensions 2026g).

4.3. HYBRID MODELS AND EXPERIMENTS

The above-mentioned tools for social policy analysis are also used in combination. For example, ETK's forecasting model builds on population projections produced by Statistics Finland and is combined with the macroeconomic model of the Ministry of Finance.

Most microsimulation models are static. They consider only the immediate effects but do not account for behavioural responses. More and more often, behavioural reactions are taken into account by making research-based assumptions. This certainly represents a step forward but also creates new problems. Bringing in assumptions concerning behavioural responses also introduces greater or smaller uncertainties. Often, available research focuses primarily on short-term behavioural responses, leading to the neglect of long-term effects.

Experiments are seldom used in social policy reform work, although the first study using an experimental design was published as early as the 1950s. It examined the effect of the supply of alcoholic beverages on consumption in sparsely populated areas in Finland (Kuusi 1956). In social and health services, research is often carried out in an experimental setting. In some cases, so-called natural experiment design can be utilised. A recent example of experimental social policy design is the basic income experiment, which is described in Section 5.

5 The role of research in four recent social policy reforms

This section examines how the above-described institutional framework, data infrastructures and research have been used in recent and ongoing social policy reforms. The first case describes earning-related pension reforms, which brought considerable changes in pension security. The second case is the basic income experiment, which attracted international attention but only led to minor changes. The third case focuses on ongoing social security reform, which has been on the agenda of many recent governments. The fourth case is the reform of health and social services, which started in 2021 and aims to reorganise and streamline the supply of these services and generate savings in the long run.

5.1. EARNINGS-RELATED PENSION REFORMS

Pension provision in Finland consists of two schemes: earnings-related pensions and national (plus guarantee) pensions, which together ensure an income in case of old age, disability or the death of a breadwinner. The aim of the earnings-related pension is to ensure that the income level during employment is maintained to a reasonable extent in retirement. It accrues from paid work and self-employment that are insured in the earnings-related pension system. The national and the guaranteed pensions secure a minimum income. Living in Finland is a precondition for receiving a national and a guaranteed pension. The national pension system is managed by Kela. The earnings-related part of the pension system has a hybrid financing structure including both contributions of employers, employees and self-employed persons (PAYG) and funding, while national pensions are financed via the state budget. (Finnish Centre for Pensions 2026f).

Earnings-related pension reforms are prepared by social partners (central labour market organisations) and the state. Since the 1990s, social partners have maintained the Pension Negotiation Group. When pension reform has been agreed in this group, often in consultation with the government, a detailed legislative process starts in the working group(s) within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Labour market organisations also participate in this phase.

The deep recession of the early 1990s, together with projections of a rapidly ageing population and associated projections of pension contributions and expenditure, shifted the focus of pension policy from improving pension rights and benefits to tightening eligibility criteria and increasing the retirement age. This shift underpinned policy changes during the 1990s and major pension reforms in 2005 and 2017. Using the terminology of Hacker (2005) and Mahoney and Thelen (2010), Finland's 1990 pension system was gradually replaced by a new one. Key structural elements include the calculation of pensionable earnings (from final salary to career average salary), the introduction of a life expectancy coefficient (which

adjusts pension levels and moderates expenditure growth in response to changes in life expectancy), and abolishing early retirement pathways (with the exception of disability pensions). These have been accompanied by parametric changes, such as the indexing of wages (used to adjust past earnings to the year of retirement and to uprate pensions in payment) (Finnish Centre for Pensions 2026b, c).

Research and planning in the 2005 and 2017 pension reforms

Since the 1990s, and between the 2005 and 2017 reforms, research support for reforms has improved considerably, as has the use of research by decision-makers. The following description is mainly based on a study by Uusitalo (2020).

In 2001 and 2002, the Pension Negotiation Group made proposals regarding the main principles of the pension reform. These proposals were accepted by the major central labour market organisations. Following the legislative work in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Parliament passed the legislation, which took effect in 2005.

In preparing the 2005 reform, the Pension Negotiation Group commissioned numerous alternative calculations and reports from ETK. These included reports on early retirement pensions and effective measures to postpone retirement, evaluations of long-term developments in pension contributions and expenditure, and pension development across occupational groups, all conducted under alternative reform scenarios. The chairperson of the Pension Negotiation Group has noted that ETK's services in the planning of the reform were of critical importance. Moreover, ETK had proactively studied mechanisms for automatically incorporating increased longevity in pension system rules (Lindell 1999). ETK also performed the first evaluation of the gender effects of the reform (Tuominen 2002).

However, the database of the 2005 reform left much to be desired. The individual-level career and earnings data were inadequate and could not be linked to the macro-level forecasting model of pension contributions and expenditure. These limitations were addressed when work on reforms started in 2017. Despite these problems regarding data, the long-term effects of the reform on pension contributions and expenditures which ETK forecasted have been proven to be broadly accurate. Etkä examined the effects of the 2005 reform by using its dynamic general equilibrium FOG model (Finnish overlapping generations model). The results were consistent with those of ETK (Lassila und Valkonen 2006).

In 2011, the programme of Jyrki Katainen's government (a coalition including conservatives, social democrats, and four smaller parties) included a proposal to start preparations for a new reform. In 2012, the Pension Negotiation Group, supplemented by the representatives of Ministries of Finance, Social Affairs, Health and Keva (public sector employee pension insurance body), reached an agreement on a new reform to come into effect in 2017.

A new approach to designing this reform was introduced. A high-level expert group was established to evaluate the effects of the 2005 reform and the need for additional measures to ensure the economic and social sustainability of the pension system when the life expectancy of the population increases. The members were appointed based on their expertise and drew on the knowledge base of their work. While the expert group was conducting its work, the Katainen government applied extra pressure to the negotiations. It stated that the reform should contribute to reducing the public deficit.

The report of the group was published in 2013 (Finnish Centre for Pensions 2013). It outlined three main approaches to addressing increasing longevity: further development of the life expectancy coefficient introduced in the 2005 reform, increasing the pensionable age, and a hybrid of these two approaches. The group opted for the third alternative.

The main labour market central organisations signed the agreement in 2014, based on the hybrid model. Before the agreement was reached, ETK provided more than one hundred calculations and several memoranda. Following detailed legislative work within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the government sent the reform package to Parliament, which approved it almost unanimously.

In both the 2005 and 2017 reforms, the role of ETK as a provider of research and planning services was crucial. Between these reforms, ETK made considerable improvements to its databases and forecasting tools, including the development of the employee-level ELSI model, which is compatible with macro-level models. Outputs from ETK's model were also used as inputs in the Ministry of Finance's macroeconomic model, improving forecasts of public finances and taxation.

Etla has also played an important role in these reforms. It employed leading experts in pension economics, and its overlapping generations model proved highly useful, particularly in analysing employment effects of proposed policy changes in the 2017 reform. Etla's research also complemented ETK's work. While ETK has been relatively cautious in proposing reforms to earnings-related pensions, partly due to its governance structure, in which labour market organisations hold a strong position, Etla, as a research institute funded by Finnish industry, has been more active in advancing pension policy proposals. Their shared objective has been to contain the growth of pension contributions and increase employment. Many of Etla's initiatives have been implemented, if not immediately, then over the longer term.

Contributions of international experts

ETK, together with the Finnish Economic Society, invited Professor Axel Börsch-Supan (University of Mannheim) to evaluate the 2005 reform. He concluded that the reform increases the employment rate of older workers, reduces early retirement, improves economic sustainability and enhances fairness by basing pensions on lifetime earnings. Like Etla, Börsch-Supan noted that pension contributions are still likely to continue rising, threatening the competitiveness of the Finnish economy (Börsch-Supan 2005).

In 2011, ETK asked two leading pension experts to evaluate the Finnish pension system. Keith Ambachtsheer (University of Toronto) evaluated the institutional structure and governance (Ambachtsheer 2013), and Nicholas Barr (London School of Economics) evaluated pension adequacy, sustainability and system design. Barr identified numerous strengths in the Finnish pension system. It provides adequate pensions for most people, covers virtually the whole population, is unified, based on consensus, and compatible with labour mobility. He made some suggestions for the next pension reform: linking pensionable age to life expectancy; allowing partial pension withdrawal; reviewing benefits for single pensioners and couples in the national pension; and considering the transfer of earnings-related pension rights between partners in the event of divorce or retirement. Some features of the 2017 reform were consistent with Barr's recommendations. (Barr 2013).

In 2021, Professor Torben M. Andersen (Aarhus University) evaluated the 2017 reform. Like previous international evaluators, Andersen identified several strengths and highlighted some long-term challenges. He made the following observations: adjustments to balance contributions and expenditures are insufficient; the projected widening gap between pensioners and those active in the labour market is concerning, as is the tendency towards increasing inequality among pensioners. Andersen also questioned whether the regulatory framework for pension providers' investment policies is adequately calibrated to achieve a suitable risk-return balance. (Andersen 2021).

The 2026 reform

In the 2017 reform, it was agreed that an extensive analysis of the system would be conducted in 2025. However, in 2023, the Orpo government decided on a new pension reform. It called on central labour market organisations to co-operate with the government in negotiations of measures to achieve the key objectives of earnings-related pension policy: sufficiency of pension amounts and coverage, intergenerational fairness, and sustainable long-term financing. The programme set a fall-back condition for negotiations: if no agreement was possible, the government would make its own decision (Finnish Government 2023). An agreement was reached, and the new legislation is currently under preparation and expected to come into effect in 2026 and 2027. The reform is expected to strengthen the financing of earnings-related pensions and improve the state of public finances (Finnish Centre for Pensions 2025).

It is widely acknowledged that these pension reforms have been successful because decision-makers from labour market organisations and the state have reached an agreement – although this process has often been time-consuming and required patience. Research has played an important role in this process. It has provided support during these preparatory stages by providing requested calculations and memoranda relating to various reform options considered by decision-makers. The interaction between research and decision-making was particularly effective in the 2017 reform. An independent expert group was tasked with designing the reform. It presented three alternative models, from which the decision-makers then made their choice. Following this, detailed work and intensive interaction began between decision-makers and researchers. It is also important to note that the data and methods available to researchers are crucial. The pension reforms in 2005 and 2017 showed considerable improvements. Good-quality data and appropriate methods are necessary conditions for the credibility of research.

5.2. BASIC INCOME EXPERIMENT

The basic income experiment is a noteworthy example of the connection between social policy and research due to its use of an experimental design. This is relatively rare, particularly because it required close interaction between social policy, administration, and research. The experiment was conducted in 2017–2018. Its primary objective was to assess the effects of a basic income on employment, income, and the use of social benefits. A secondary objective was to gather information on the wellbeing of the basic income recipients. The experiment has been comprehensively described and analysed in an official report published by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (Kangas et al. 2020), and in a more critical scientific report (Kangas et al. 2022). This section draws on these two reports.

The Government Programme of Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's centre-right coalition government (2015–2019) included a decision to conduct a basic income experiment. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health was primarily responsible for planning and implementation. The experiment required specific legislation, which was passed in 2016. Parliamentary debates revealed differences of opinion between political parties regarding basic income. Despite being part of the government, social democrats and conservatives were critical. Some criticism also came from the Green Party and the Left Alliance, even though they were generally supportive of the idea. The strongest support came from the Prime Minister's Centre Party and the Finns Party, the third party in the Sipilä coalition government. Despite the criticisms, all MPs voted for the experiment, except for the five members of the Christian Democratic Party.

A multidisciplinary research consortium led by the Research Department of Kela was selected to design and implement the experiment. The consortium included researchers from Kela, VATT, LABORE, the University of Tampere, and the think tank Tänk. As a first step, the

consortium produced an exploratory study of the advantages and disadvantages of various basic income models. Based on this analysis, the government selected the model to be tested.

In the experiment, 2000 people aged 25–58 receiving unemployment benefits from Kela were randomly selected to form the treatment group. Other recipients formed the control group. The basic income was paid unconditionally to the treatment group for two years. It was not affected by income from employment or self-employment.

The results of the register data analysis showed that employment in the treatment group increased more than in the control group. However, in the middle of the experiment, the government introduced a confounding factor, the so-called 'activation model' for the unemployed. The evaluation report concluded that this confounding factor was responsible for the employment effects (Kangas et al. 2021).

The basic income experiment illustrates the tension between short political cycles and the long-term perspective of reform research. While the government initiated, legislated for and financed the experiment, the same government went on to make policy changes which undermined the experiment. There were some deviations from the experiment design. The planning time frame was tight. Some design choices involved trade-offs between practical and scientific considerations. Finally, constitutional constraints posed challenges for the design, and budgetary constraints limited the study.

Despite these limitations, the Finnish basic income experiment was unique in several respects. The experiment was a large-scale, national, randomised experiment. Participation in the experiment was mandatory to avoid selection bias. The intervention and control groups were identical at the beginning of the experiment. This research design, combined with up-to-date register data, made it possible to draw causal conclusions on the effects of basic income on employment.

The experiment attracted exceptionally wide public interest both within Finland and internationally. Although universal basic income has been widely discussed in academic, popular, and policy circles for decades, Finland was the first country to implement a nationwide, controlled, randomised trial of universal basic income.

However, the experiment did not lead to any significant steps towards implementing a basic income. Politically, basic income was and remains a controversial idea. Institutionally, it does not fit smoothly within the established framework of Finnish social policy, which is based on a combination of earnings-related and residence-based benefits.

5.3. SOCIAL SECURITY REFORM

Reform of basic social policy cash benefits has been on the Finnish political agenda for years. Matti Vanhanen's centre-right government (2007–2010) established a committee to prepare a comprehensive reform of social security (the Sata committee) in 2007. The committee consisted of the representatives from ministries, non-governmental organisations and central labour market organisations. The task of the Sata committee was to prepare a comprehensive reform of social protection: a proposal for adequate basic protection, earnings-related security with a focus on activation measures, improved incentives, simplification of the social security system, and ensuring the sustainability of social protection. In 2009, blue- and white-collar employee organisations withdrew from the committee due to their scepticism towards the government. In the same year, the committee submitted its final report to the Minister of Social Affairs and Health. It included many proposals, some of which led to legislative reforms. The most significant was the introduction of a new pension benefit the guaranteed pension, which improved the smallest pensions (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2009). Given the

committee's high ambitions, its outcome has been widely regarded as a disappointment. There was distrust and disagreement between the centre-right government and the central employee labour market organisations, the main dispute being the roles of citizenship-based and earnings-based benefits. In 2017, Juha Sipilä's centre-right government (2015–2019) made another effort to reform basic social security and employment (Perusturvan 2017) but this did not result in any legislative reforms.

Sanna Marin's centre-left government (2019–2023) marked a fresh approach in several respects. It established a parliamentary committee to prepare the reform. The committee's term is exceptionally long, spanning the years 2020–2027, extending over two parliamentary terms. The committee's task is to reform the social security system as a whole. The committee addresses basic security, earnings-related security, social assistance, as well as their interconnections and financing, and seeks to improve coordination between services and benefits. A novel feature of its work is the committee's set of operative principles. These are openness, constructive dialogue, research-based approach and independence. The committee has emphasised that resources for the reform should be secured at the very beginning and that major reforms require their own "in-house" research and research team.

The committee is chaired by civil servants, the first chairperson being a research professor from THL. It is assumed that MPs on the committee will keep their parliamentary groups informed, bring their views to the committee and secure their support for the reform process. Research will play a more prominent role than in the previous efforts to reform social security.

At the end of its first four years, the committee presented its interim report in 2023. It proposed the unification and consolidation of cause-based basic security benefits, with consideration of earnings-related security. The aim was to clarify and simplify the benefit system. The committee's proposals for future governments included a range of new initiatives. These concerned social security for children and families, benefits related to work ability and incapacity for work, unemployment insurance, education and skills development, housing subsidies, income support, and social security administration and digitalisation (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2023c).

The Orpo government amended the mandate of the committee by focusing its work on two main issues. The committee examines the individual and family-based nature of benefits and makes proposals on how to develop family-related benefits. It also assesses how current benefits and associated services correspond to individuals' life situations and makes suggestions for reforms in this issue (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2023b). In the second term, meetings will be held for the entire committee as well as separately for the committee's parliamentary members. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health established an evaluation and review group composed of ministries and research institutions to support the committee's work (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2023a).

The Orpo government has assumed responsibility for certain tasks from the committee. Its own initiatives include the reform of basic social security, income support, and general housing support. In line with the Orpo Government Programme, a reform of basic income security has been implemented to improve work incentives, streamline the social security system and simplify benefits. The reform was based on the Social Security Committee's interim report and entered into force in 2026 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2026).

In summary, the Social Security Committee represents a new approach to improving the interaction between research and political decision-making. The research capacity available to the committee is substantial and reflects a high level of expertise from various institutions. Although the Orpo government has continued the work of the committee established by the Marin government, it has made changes to its mandate and working methods. Due to its

strong commitment to reducing the budget deficit, the Orpo government has also implemented cuts to residence-based social benefits.

The goals set for social security reform appear overly ambitious to be achieved in two parliamentary terms. This is mainly due to political disagreements regarding the relationship between earnings-related and residence-based benefits and, more importantly, to disagreements over the appropriate balance between benefit generosity, obligations to participate in society and incentives to return to work. For these reasons, several governments since 2007 have failed to achieve ambitious, comprehensive social security reform. Nevertheless, social policy has not been at a standstill. All governments have introduced changes of varying kinds, without a comprehensive overall plan. Adequate, high-quality research support for social security reform, as well as the close interaction between research and decision-making, has been available, but political disagreements over such comprehensive reform remain significant.

5.4. REFORM OF SOCIAL AND HEALTHCARE SERVICES

The Constitution of Finland guarantees everyone the right to adequate social and healthcare services. Until 2022, social and healthcare services were organised at three levels. More than 300 municipalities were responsible for primary care services. They could form joint municipal authorities to run more specialised services. At the third level, there were 21 healthcare districts that were responsible for specialised, more complex care. At the national level, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health oversees the system.

The challenges of the service delivery system have long been recognised. There are numerous small municipalities, and the resources available to municipalities to provide services to their residents vary considerably. Municipal healthcare centres often have long waiting lists and are over-crowded, as are care services for the old, whereas occupational healthcare and specialised healthcare function much better. This creates inequalities of access and socio-economic and regional differences. Finland exhibits large socio-economic health differences compared with other OECD countries (OECD 2023). The costs of health and long-term care are increasing, partly due to the ageing population.

Several governments have tried to reform the system. Marin's government succeeded in implementing a reform which was passed by Parliament in 2021. This was the largest reform of social and health services in decades. Its objectives were to reduce inequalities in health and wellbeing, ensure equal access to high-quality health and social services, improve the availability and accessibility of services, ensure the availability of skilled labour, respond to societal changes, and contain cost growth (Finnish Government 2019).

The reform restructured the organisation of public healthcare, social welfare services and rescue services. From 2023 onwards, new wellbeing service counties, numbering 21 plus the capital city Helsinki, became responsible for social, health and rescue services, replacing over 300 municipalities. The municipalities continued to organise certain services, including child day-care, basic education, sports, and cultural services (Finnish Government 2022).

Midway through Marin's term, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare assessed the organisation of social welfare and healthcare services in different areas of the country and produced region-specific expert evaluations and a national evaluation of their observations. (Hetemaa et al. 2021).

The Orpo government has continued to implement the reform with its own approach. The Government Programme states that the government monitors and evaluates the functioning of the administrative structure of social and health services, the sustainability and incentives

of the financing model, and the effectiveness of the service system, including the implementation of service integration and service accessibility (Government Programme 2023).

At the halfway point of Orpo's term, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health published a report on the state of wellbeing services (social, health and rescue services). It assessed the implementation of the wellbeing services area reform over the years 2023–2025 and examined the conditions for achieving the reform's long-term objectives. From a research perspective, it is noteworthy that this evaluation was carried out by ten independent experts and researchers, with backgrounds mainly in health economics, public health, social and health policy, and administrative sciences. The evaluation did not commission any new research but used existing studies and reports. The evaluation group made seven short-term recommendations and presented three alternative models for long-term development: increased regional self-government, development of the current model, and increased state control (Leppinen 2025).

Research and planning support across different phases of reform has been extensive but varied. The main research and planning support has been provided by THL's research, monitoring, and evaluation functions, which have made significant contributions to numerous national and regional reports, analyses, and expert statements provided for decision-makers in politics and administration. Other research institutes and universities have also played an important role.

It is widely accepted that this reform still has a long way to go. Experts and decision-makers have a range of concerns. There are concerns that some wellbeing service counties have too small a population size and are therefore economically and operationally vulnerable in providing services. Other major concerns are anticipated difficulties in controlling the regional service structure due to the complexity of the system, in strengthening basic services due to the parallel, resource-intensive occupational healthcare system, in managing patient selection, and in controlling costs. Politically, disagreements persist regarding the division of authority between state and counties, the financing of services, the number and population size of wellbeing counties and the role of private healthcare providers.

6 Conclusions

The forms of political consultancy in social policy vary, and many kinds of institutional arrangements have been utilised. Parliamentary and non-parliamentary committees, as well as working groups with or without academic participation, have been utilised. The role of research and the interplay of decision-making and research have varied.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health is the key institution in preparing social policy reforms. However, in recent decades, the role of the Ministry of Finance has become more prominent due to pressures on public finances. The corporatist aspects of social policy decision-making have weakened but they remain particularly evident in pension policy and other earnings-related benefits.

Many research institutes contribute to supporting social policy decision-making. The research institutes under the umbrella of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, particularly the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), play a prominent role. In pension policy and in earnings-related social benefits, the role of the Finnish Centre for Pensions (ETK) in providing research support is essential. Kela provides research, particularly on residence-based social security schemes. Besides these, there are several research institutes which participate in the preparation of social policy reforms. These include economic research institutes Etila, VATT, LABORE and SOSTE, the central organ of third-sector social and health organisations in social and health policy issues.

Databases for social and health policy purposes are well developed, at least when compared with other countries. This is partly due to the use of personal identification numbers, which enables the combination of register data from various administrative sources and survey data. Statistics Finland, THL and Kela are key institutions maintaining and developing social policy databases, as is ETK in the case of pension policy data. Relevant survey datasets are available in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive. The data sets used in research are often developed jointly by researchers and the owners of this data.

The institutions and tools required to provide adequate research-based support for social policy decision-making in Finland are in good shape. Adequate quantitative models and research methods are available for evaluating proposed policy reforms. While this is beneficial, it also presents a challenge. Effects that cannot be quantified are easily overlooked. This also means that long-term effects and unanticipated consequences may receive less attention in reform processes than they deserve. There is clearly scope for further development in research.

The ways in which research and planning have been integrated into social policy reform processes have varied. Reforms have been prepared by using different organisational forms, ranging from single-expert groups to parliamentary committees. All these forms can utilise research in a variety of ways. The most fruitful case presented in this paper is the 2017 earnings-related pension reform. The decision-makers defined the goals of the reforms and

an independent expert group with access to the best available research resources analysed various alternatives. On this basis, decision-makers proceeded by primarily using ETK's planning services. Another interesting example is the ongoing social security reform, due to the integration of parliamentary political guidance and both administrative and scientific expertise in the committee work. However, the outcomes of this reform model remain to be seen. There is no single model suitable for all situations. Solutions have varied and will likely continue to vary in the future.

Research, how advanced it may be, cannot solve political disagreements over social policy. However, research findings can help to define the political room for manoeuvre more precisely. Long-term research may also contribute to gradually bringing political positions closer together. On the other hand, the convergence of research and decision-making has created opportunities for stronger political steering of research.

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