

No Job? GET LOST!

BY ANDREW HIGGINS | FOR *THE NEW YORK TIMES* UPFRONT

In one part of Norway, unemployment isn't allowed.

Norway's northernmost territory, Svalbard, has a police force with just six officers and a single jail cell for an area twice the size of New Jersey. But even that is overkill: Nobody has been locked up in the capital, Longyearbyen, since the summer of 2013. And that was for just two days.

The key to Svalbard's status as Europe's closest thing to a crime-free society, according to the governor, is that unemployment is, in effect, illegal. "If you don't have a job, you can't live here," Governor Odd Olsen Ingero says.

How is such a policy enforced? By deporting the jobless. Even retirees are sent away unless they can prove they can support themselves. Homelessness is also banned; all residents must have a permanent address.

The unusual rules have a lot to do with Svalbard's geography and climate. An archipelago located 800 miles from the North Pole, Svalbard is shrouded in near-total darkness for six months of the year and snowfall continues deep into summer. The government says that banning homelessness and unemployment—a problem plaguing much of Europe—is meant to ensure that none of Svalbard's nearly 3,000 residents freezes to death.

FRONT DOORS UNLOCKED

"[It] is a very quiet and law-abiding society," says Ingero. In total, the police in Svalbard handle about 100 cases a year, most of which involve infractions like reckless driving on snowmobiles and shoplifting. Residents regularly leave their car and snowmobile keys in the ignition and don't bother locking their front doors. Coffee shop patrons leave their computers unattended, never worrying they might get stolen. No serious crimes have been reported so far this year; however, the authorities are

worried about a spate of littering by untidy scientists who failed to clean up their garbage after doing research in the wilderness.

Ingero, who spent most of his previous career fighting crime as a senior police official on the Norwegian mainland, isn't advocating the Svalbard approach as a solution to crime elsewhere. But he does think it shows a clear link between unemployment and lawlessness.

At the same time, it also seems to debunk a view held by populist parties across Europe, including Norway, that immigration is largely to blame for rising crime: Svalbard has no restrictions on foreigners. In fact, nearly a third of all residents are from elsewhere, including Thailand and China; hundreds of Ukrainians also work in a mining operation owned by Russia. "The demographics here are rather unique," says Ingero.

Svalbard's bans against joblessness and homelessness are a far cry from how things operate in the rest of Norway. The country prides itself on being a "welfare state," in which the government provides cradle-to-grave support—and pays for it with high income taxes and a 25 percent sales tax, the ninth-highest in the world. (In the U.S., the highest sales tax is 9.5 percent, in Tennessee.)

GUNS & POLAR BEARS

Svalbard does fund a school and a hospital, and subsidizes the territory's biggest employer—a money-losing state-owned coal company. But other than that, residents largely have to fend for themselves without any social services to fall back on, which is why taxes are lower in Svalbard than elsewhere in Norway.

Though Svalbard has been featured in the James Bond movie *Die Another Day*—part of a car chase on ice was filmed there—there are so few human villains that polar bears have taken on the role as the main troublemakers.

Polar bear attacks regularly make front-page news (along with melting glaciers and scientific research projects). That's why nearly everyone in Svalbard owns a gun. The police enforce a rule that anybody moving outside the city limits of Longyearbyen must carry a weapon and know how to use it.

Another recent hot topic is the exorbitant price of fresh food. A local newspaper ran an “exposé” on what it called the world’s most expensive milk (nearly \$27 per gallon, compared with an average of about \$3.70 in the U.S.). Mark Sabbatini, an American in Svalbard who edits an English-language weekly called Icepeople, says he doesn’t worry much about bears and even less about thieves and muggers. “I used to be a crime reporter in Los Angeles,” he says. “I can’t say I enjoyed it.”

But he acknowledges that living in such a remote place brings its own stresses. “If you want to live here,” he says, “there is something slightly warped about you.”