

# Young and violent

## Violent crime among juveniles in the Netherlands - trends and causes

### Summary

In this study on juvenile violence in the Netherlands, the following three aspects have been examined:

- The development of physical violence among juveniles (ages 12-18) since 1985.
- A state-of-the-art survey of international literature.
- Possible explanations of the recent increase in violence.

The main objective of the research project was to further analyse available data and not so much to reveal new facts. The second goal was to broaden our knowledge about the background of aggressive and violent behaviour among juveniles.

Regarding the first aspect a description is given of the type and number of violent crimes committed by juveniles. This outline is based on regional and national police data and on self-report data in the period 1985 through 1996. The various data sources show increases for the same types of offending: assault, armed robbery and threat. Because comparable patterns emerge from various data sources the trends observed are considered true. There is, however, reason to believe that the actual increase is smaller than the figures initially appear to suggest. Over ten factors can be pointed out that might have influenced the crime levels found, both in positive and in negative ways. Moreover, these factors may have interacted with one another.

As for the second issue, a comprehensive literature review was conducted. This part of the study used a life course perspective, in which (parts of) various criminological theories may be combined. The model states that the earlier in the life of an individual things go wrong, the more this will affect further development of the child. 'Developmental' criminology aims at understanding how developments evolve from each other. Thus, attention is focused on the risk and protective factors to which children are exposed during the course of their lives. Four levels are being distinguished: the individual, the family, the level of school and peers, and the social and cultural level. We suggest that certain combinations of, or sequences of exposure to, risk factors are related to different types of violence or types of offenders. In the available literature no distinct patterns were found. It is generally agreed, however, that 'early starters' often remain violent for many years whereas violent behaviour in 'late starters' usually is of a temporary nature. Early starters have been exposed to (many) risk factors early in life; the 'influence of peers' is the main factor which averts late starters from the right path. The literature review yields several suggestions for further research.

In search of further confirmation of the life course perspective, interviews were conducted with both convicted juveniles and 'significant actors' in the field of (violent) juveniles. Since these interviews were limited in number, the results cannot be generalised but will serve as an illustration. Eight boys were interviewed, aged 14 to 20 years, who were all involved in serious violent offences. In addition, the police and judicial records of these boys were analysed. Based on these two sources eight case histories were created. Together they confirm the idea that exposure to many risk factors early in life leads to an virtually irreversible situation during adolescence. Nine 'significant actors' were interviewed: among them school directors, social workers, a policeman and a judge. Some observed that violence always requires a multicausal explanation. All agree that in recent years there has been an increase in juvenile violence, especially group violence.

We can only speculate on an explanation for the increase of juvenile violence in the Netherlands. The influence of individual factors is probably marginal. Family factors, however, may have played a crucial role. Compared to some decades ago, more children seem to grow up in an unstable home environment. In schools, lack of order and discipline might be an important cause of increased violence. Furthermore, social and cultural factors may have contributed to the increase in juvenile violence. The availability of alcohol and drugs is one of them. Exposure to violence in the media and in computer games are also mentioned. Special attention is given to the situation in which many children of ethnic minorities grow up. In terms of risk factors, they form a vulnerable group. Starting with educational problems at home, family communication often will be deficient; this might ultimately result in poor school performance, unemployment, and lack of commitment to society. When these juveniles seek one another's company, group formation is a matter of course, and some of them are likely to end up with a violent life style.

### **Policy recommendations**

The first recommendation concerns the registration of violent offences by the police. As long as this is not improved it will not be possible to reliably estimate the nature and development of violence in society. Thus, a solid basis for adequate policy is missing. Further recommendations concern the repression and prevention of juvenile violent crime. Regarding repression, the police and the judiciary are the most obvious authorities to take action. Unfortunately, the chance of getting caught is small and influencing behaviour through judicial intervention has proven difficult. Our literature review suggests that prevention offers more of a perspective. Preventive attempts should be made concerning each of the levels mentioned above. At the family level, early intervention by means of family programmes and educational support to families with high concentrations of risk factors is recommended. Ethnic parents and children deserve special attention. Regarding school, it is suggested to experiment with so-called 'school assistants' who can help to maintain order, and to organise schools in such a way as to operate in small units in which everyone knows each other. Truancy should be firmly dealt with and early dropping-out should be avoided. On a wider societal level it is important to discourage alcohol and drug use, to develop activities which allow juveniles to positively express their need to prove themselves, and to offer more perspectives to ethnic juveniles. The effect will be optimal only if all these actions are implemented at the same time and in a coherent manner. Various experts and working groups in the Netherlands have already argued for such an integral approach. In our study, strong support was found for the thought that the efforts will be more effective if priority is given to reducing risk factors that appear early in life.

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### **Jong en gewelddadig; ontwikkeling en achtergronden vande geweldscriminaliteit onder jeugdigen**

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The Hague, WODC, 1998

Onderzoek en beleid, no. 174