

Denying or confessing suspects

How many suspects tend to co-operate with police investigations?

Summary

In police circles in the Netherlands there has been some debate on the availability of a special interrogation technique to be applied on 'reluctant' suspects. Although a clear picture of the extent of the problem is lacking, the general feeling is that the standard modes of questioning are not sufficient, especially in cases of serious crime and/or professional criminals.

To clarify this issue the WODC research and documentation center analysed the records of a sample of 704 criminal cases, all settled by the courts or the prosecutor's office in 1993. More than 80% of the almost 2,400 crimes involved had been admitted by the suspects during police interrogations, only 17% of the criminal offences were denied. Young suspects and first offenders more readily confessed their crimes than older suspect and recidivists. Turkish suspects denied more often than suspects of other ethnic groups; sexual crimes were denied most frequently. Tactical considerations seem to play a role as well. In cases in which the evidence is (very) convincing (for instance when the culprit is caught red-handed) the co-operation of the suspect is practically guaranteed. In weak cases those which are dismissed or lead to acquittal the chances the suspect will deny the offence are much larger.

The results of this study show that if there is a need for a special interrogation technique in the Netherlands, this technique will only be called for in a minority of cases. Less than one fifth of the offences reported in criminal cases is denied. About one half of the denying suspects are convicted regardless of their denial. The others are acquitted or their case is dismissed. An unknown number of suspects in this last category did not commit the offense, so the number of *offenders* who deny the allegations and get away with it is even smaller. Only with respect to this last group a new interrogation technique might be appropriate.