

Summary, conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

On 4 September 2002, a pilot was started with the publicly-privately financed telephone reporting line '*Meld Misdaad Anoniem*' (Report Crime Anonymously) (0800-7000). The purpose of this project, briefly called 'M.', is to make a considerable contribution to solving crimes, or to preventing them, by promoting an active attitude among citizens towards the fight against crime. The commissioning authority of the pilot is the '*Nationaal Platform Criminaliteitsbeheersing*' (Dutch National Platform Crime Control).

By order of the '*Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum*' (Scientific Research and Documentation Centre) (WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice, Blauw Research has carefully monitored the development of Project M. Although it was agreed to set up the pilot for a period of one year, which is supported by five police regions (Utrecht, Twente, IJsselland, Haaglanden, and Amsterdam-Amstelland) and the '*Verbond van Verzekeraars*' (Dutch Association of Insurers), this evaluation focuses on the first eight months of the project in view of a possible nation-wide introduction and implementing possible improvements.

Media attention

M. generated a lot of nation-wide media attention, especially at its start. This media attention particularly focused on the introduction of the reporting line itself. After the introduction, the national attention decreased considerably, except for some upsurges created by reporting some interim results of the project.

Regionally, in particular Twente and IJsselland provided much general publicity for M. at the start. The effect of this campaign is shown, among other things, by a more steady public profile in these regions. The other regional media attention was strongly linked to specific, thematic campaigns, or to specific results achieved. Among the latter category, the efforts of Haaglanden and Utrecht especially attracted attention. Still, in particular in the major cities the effect of the nation-wide media attention seems to have largely died down. In the opinion of almost all media people, there were insufficient financial means and there was too little time available to pay structural attention to M. The connection between the amount of funding and time put into the regional media campaign and the generated media attention is clearly shown in the study. The active involvement of an '*RPC*' (Regional Assistant Commissioner) turns out to be useful in this respect.

It may be concluded that the media attention given was primarily of a factual nature. In most cases, press reports were followed quite literally. The effect of this is that most press reports were quite positive with respect to content, so that the free publicity has left a positive impression with the public. The fact that instead of 'reporting line' or 'tip-off line' the word 'grass line' was frequently used did not spoil the effect. Therefore in the opinion of Blauw Research, there is no need to pay additional attention to adjusting the public opinion on this point, when continuing the project. All in all, it is remarkable to find that the media adopted such an uncritical attitude, the more as it was expected that the media would monitor M. with Argus' eyes. This can be seen as a clear success of the media campaign. On the other hand, it has to be observed that important communication objectives of the project, such as a safer society, the civic duty to report crimes, or the public-private nature of the reporting line, have hardly come across.

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Attitude of the public

The positive attitude with regard to the opportunity of reporting anonymously is also shown by two successive opinion polls amongst the general public: 70% of the interviewees are frankly enthusiastic about the introduction of the M. reporting line; another 10% are *somewhat* positive. The social support for M. is considerably more positive than expected by the project management. There appears to be a clear social demand for such a reporting line.

The anonymity of the reporting line makes the step of reporting a crime easier. A large part of the public is also convinced that a reporting is treated anonymously, even if some people are still reticent. It remains important for M. to communicate the way in which the front-office exercises care in keeping the reporting anonymous. During the pilot, however, confidence in the anonymity of the reports somewhat increased.

A feeling of civic duty when reporting a crime is present in many people. It is therefore notable that up to now hardly any attention has been paid to this aspect in the communications. For it is clear that Project M. plays a role in the social desire for a safer society. The project offers people the opportunity to take responsibility without running any risk. Therefore the project seems to link up perfectly with the social support for a tougher and broader approach to fighting crime. By further capitalising on the social desire for safety and the existing sense of duty in the course of a possible continuation of the project, the number of reports may well show a strong increase.

Two-thirds of the public indeed indicate that they will *certainly* or *probably* make use of M. if an opportunity presents itself. It appears that the reporting line is particularly associated with 'more severe' crimes (murder, acts of violence, drug trafficking, arms trade, robbery) and less with 'softer' crimes such as fraud, nuisance, traffic violations, work in the black economy, prostitution, or illegal aliens. When the focus of the reporting line were to be even more strongly directed at 'more severe' crimes or specific situations, in which anonymity is urgently required, the support may be even larger.

The media study has shown that the nature of the calls can be influenced by concentrating media attention on specific crimes. An example is the fireworks campaign (though very much limited to a specific period), but also much attention in the media for rounding up cannabis plantations has very probably contributed to an increased number of calls in the subsequent period. Local attention, such as in Utrecht in connection with a sexual offence, has also led to many (useful) tip-offs.

Familiarity with M.

Although the attitude towards an anonymous reporting line is positive, the familiarity with M. is very disappointing. The level of familiarity immediately after the start is, also due to decreasing media attention, no longer reached after six months. People do have a vague recollection of a 'grass line', but after an explanation only 35% of the pilot population and one in four of the remaining Dutch citizens are familiar with the project. Almost nobody is spontaneously able to give the telephone number (0800-7000) or the website (www.meldmisdaad.nl). This does not come as a total surprise in view of experiences with other telephone numbers (e.g. 0900 8844). Considerably more money and energy has been spent on the generation of more familiarity of various other similar telephone numbers with relatively limited success. So the question here is whether the expectations of the project plan – the target was a spontaneous familiarity with the telephone number of 40% - were indeed realistic in view of the time available and the available budget. Maybe the target should not be to make a 'top of mind' number but a number that can be easily found, whereby more use can be made of a medium such as the Internet.

In the opinion of Blauw Research, the website has a much greater potential than that which is now reached with the current familiarity. The medium is very suitable as a source of information and for the feed-back of results to the public. It is advisable to formulate a clear strategy for promoting the website in case of a follow-up project.

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As with other media studies it turns out in this study that television plays an important role in the generation of familiarity. In the most recent period the television programme '*Opsporing verzocht*' (Dutch Crime Watch) ensured additional attention. The programme appears to be a valuable and suitable instrument for generating familiarity. A drawback of the programme is, however, that it is very much associated with the police, whereas on the contrary 0800-7000 is indeed not a number of the police. Perhaps it is possible to make clear within the context of the programme that M. is a public-private cooperative project.

Reporting

In spite of a limited familiarity M. people have remarkably often succeeded in finding the reporting line: the number of times that actually contact was sought with M. in any case exceeds the expectations of the project agency. Especially in the first month of the pilot many calls came in; afterwards this number stabilised to about 2,000 answered calls per month, of which about 1,000 were actually meant for M. In addition, about 50% of all calls related to regions outside the pilot, which illustrates the national character of the reporting line and the campaign.

Because in the initial stage the number of calls was considerably larger than expected, this led to initial problems in both front-office and back-offices. The project team quickly responded to these problems. Thereby the focus was initially in particular directed at a smooth operation of the processes as these had been formulated within the framework of M. Later on, more attention was paid to monitoring the calls on quantity, quality and usefulness. Finally, the team succeeded in improving the intrinsic quality of the calls during the pilot, among other things by regularly exchanging tips and experiences. The project agency played an active, coordinating role in this context.

In the regions with major cities, the police receive 60 M. calls per month on average; IJssel and Twente each receive 14 calls per month on average. The *Verbond van Verzekeraars* has some 20 calls per month. There is a strong connection between the amount of media attention during a specific week and the number of calls received by the front-office in that period. The media are thus an important success factor for the project, also in view of the future. The communication strategy should therefore be aimed at holding on to the attention of the press, preferably through the feed-back of relevant results. In view of the number of attempted calls outside the business hours of the reporting line, the number of calls can also be positively influenced by longer business hours.

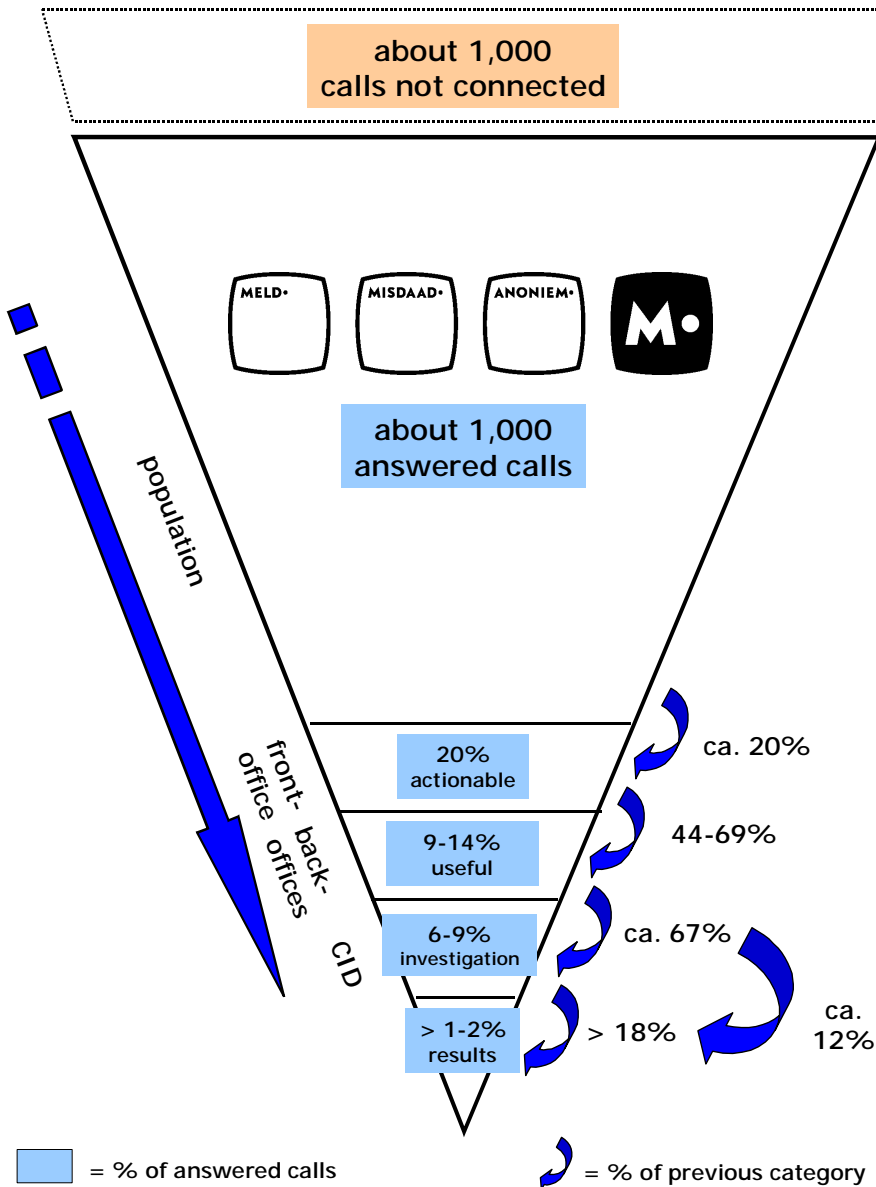
Internal feed-back

A system of outcome reports on the basis whereof back-offices give feed-back to the project agency about the usefulness of the calls, did not function as desired during the entire pilot. The response and the quality of the completed forms were less than expected. The reasons for this lie partly in the automated system form itself, partly in the extent in which the registration points match daily practice, and partly in the lack of discipline in completing the forms. Ever since the start of the pilot, optimising has continuously been strived for in all these fields, which ultimately indeed has resulted in improvements. This also shows a substantial commitment of the various executive organisations to make a success of the project. However, the current findings retain a partly indicative nature, which is indicated by way of margins:

On average, one-fifth of all front-office calls contain actionable information. An important part of the actionable calls (44-69%) is labelled as useful by the back-offices. This means that 9% to 14% of all calls are useful. A recent experience figure of the similar project Crimestoppers in the UK also lies within these margins (*Evaluating the impact of Crimestoppers, Home Office, 2003*). Two-thirds of the useful calls are actually used in investigations, whereby up to now one in five investigated cases has produced a concrete result. Many arrests could be made. Although these mainly concerned drug crimes (about 60%, even slightly more than with Crimestoppers), results have also been booked within the analysed study period with several robberies, assaults, threats and other crimes endangering a person's safety. The escape of a prisoner was prevented. In addition, much illegal firework was found, various cases of arson were solved, and cases of theft, fraud and vandalism were solved. Some illegal aliens were also

arrested. Although within the analysed study scope no arrests were up to now recorded with regard to murder, manslaughter or sexual offences, the relevant tip-offs were considered to be very useful by the back-offices concerned. Besides, in case of such often complex cases in particular, calls alone cannot lead to detection. The call often contributes to the solution of a case in a way that is difficult to quantify.

On the basis of the information available, the current monthly stream of calls can roughly be pictured as follows (please note that only the stream within the active pilot regions is shown):



Source: Blauw Research

NB: the figures solely concern pilot regions. These regions contain about a quarter of the population. A more or less equal number of calls (1,000) concerns the rest of the Netherlands (three-quarters of the population).

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It is estimated that one to two per cent of the current calls made in the front-office of M. lead to results in investigations. This is also similar with recent experiences in Crimestoppers, where slightly more than 1% of the calls led to results in investigations. The figures in the diagram above show a dynamism that has parallels with other inbound projects, such as labour market campaigns. A recruitment campaign (e.g. for the police) generally leads to many ten of thousands of calls of interested persons. When a few percent of these interested persons actually apply for a selection, such a campaign is considered very successful. In such projects many calls are always needed in order to arrive at a seemingly small concrete result.

The number of detections made by means of calls considered as actionable is very important, because back-offices actually put capacity into them. The rate of success is about 12%. Nevertheless a number of arguments can be put forward why this percentage should be seen as a lower limit:

- The calls that contribute to an investigation in the long term are, of course, not yet visible in the pilot.
- It is not always in the interest of the police to mention the role of M. during an investigation. This might play down their own contribution, or they may prefer not to feed back information as the investigation is still running.
- Some calls may turn out to be useful at a later time, for instance due to new findings, although the police forces concerned have indicated in the outcome reports that a call was not useful. This is not always corrected.

On the other hand, a number of older, very useful cases may have been reported by civilians as a result of the introduction of the reporting line. This effect will die out in the long term.

Internal support

Project M. is seen by all employees of the back-offices and the project agency that were interviewed during the assessment study, as a valuable addition to the daily working practice, also with regard to the results. Although on the basis of the information system people are only to a limited extent able to assess what the project actually yields (based on figures), the general feeling exists that the added value is large. This positive impression is particularly based on cases whereby the call of M. has played an important role in the investigation or prevention of a crime.

Room for improvement

During the assessment study, Blauw Research has ascertained a number of aspects that offer room for improvement and that are expected to increase the overall effectiveness and usefulness of the calls. It was observed, for instance, that regarding representatives from the police forces the more they are involved, the more enthusiastic they are about the project. Investigating officers do generally see the added value of M. but they also experience the less positive effects. They feel they can do less with anonymous calls than with regularly reported cases, and reactions to an anonymous call asks for a different approach than the regular approach. In regions where the M. method appears to have taken root, however, they can boast of success stories of colleagues who have personally experienced that a tip-off has led to a quicker solution. An exchange of experiences is therefore important.

Another important factor in the cost-benefit analysis that has to be made with regard to M. is the large number of less useful and therefore also less interesting calls. Of the estimated 9-14% useful calls (as percentage of all calls together), a fairly large percentage concerns the type of call that refers to offences that (in practice) are not considered a priority by the judicial authorities and the police (such as weed cultivation, aliens supervision, social security fraud),

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whereas these do require attention. The expectations police officers have with regard to M. appear to lie in particular with serious crime, as is the case with the population. There is a risk that a one-sidedness of the calls will prejudice the support for the project within the police forces. A qualitatively better inflow of calls (for instance by way of thematic media campaigns), a severe filtration by front-office and maybe also the back-office will increase the chance that tip-offs will actually be included in investigations, and the internal support will be increased. Thus resulting in a multiplier effect.

In order to increase internal support, Blauw Research is of the opinion that it is important to aim at the police and the private participant(s) to M. being fed with calls that correspond with the priorities of the judicial authorities, the police, and the private participants concerned. A number of improvements could contribute to the process:

- It has turned out that media attention for specific crimes in combination with M. also leads to a greater number of calls that are connected to those sorts of crimes. This provides M. with the means of to a certain extent directing the nature of the calls. The project executives could consider to more often bring the reporting line to the attention in a thematic way, so that the type of crime on which the forces want to get tip-offs is associated more directly with the reporting line. Sufficient means have, of course, to be made available for this.
- The feed-back of results to the media could be more centrally directed as well. A thematically directed communication can be a valuable instrument to promote a multiplier effect: for the communication leads to an increased number of calls in the selected field of crime and therefore to an increased number of solved cases in this field. This in its turn generates new publicity, which can lead again to new calls. In addition, it is easier to organise the internal process, from the campaign activities to the processing of the calls in the back-offices, around a certain, prepared theme.
- Throughout the entire project, it is important to learn from each other's experience. As many regions have chosen their own method, it is important to continue exchanging best practices. This too can considerably contribute to the functional improvement of anonymously reporting crimes.
- A tendency that is already noticeable is that back-offices themselves make an assessment of the added value of a call before others, deeper in the organisation, are actively charged with them. The back-office can decide to register less useful calls for future use but not to pass them on. It remains to be seen whether employees of the back-office are always able to make a correct assessment. They themselves indicate that they do not always have sufficient information to be able to arrive at a correct assessment.

In order to promote the accuracy and availability of relevant management information, Blauw Research advises to take another critical look at the form and content of the outcome reports. Some options in particular turn out to admit more than one interpretation in practice, such as the reason to be given for non-useful calls, and the description of the follow-up action:

- On the one hand, part of the calls that are theoretically classified as useful are in practice not qualified for further investigation. In particular the balance between the content of the call and the quality of the information and the limited time and the priorities established within that time make that about one-third of the calls classified as useful are still put at the bottom of the pile.
- On the other hand, it is found that the consideration described above also directly influences the degree in which the back-offices assess the calls as useful. In other words: due to the pressure of time, people are more critical of usefulness.

By having the options in the outcome reports correspond more closely to the considerations that play a role in practice, more information can be gathered about which considerations influence the way in which calls are processed.

Public-private cooperation

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At the '*Verbond van Verzekeraars*', up to now the only private partner in the reporting line, there seems to be another dynamism with regard to the calls than at the police. In practice, it turns out to be difficult to connect calls to specific insurance policies. When this succeeds, much time is generally needed, as a result of the procedures to be followed, before concrete results can be reported. The terms fixed for feeding back progress are less practical for the '*Verbond van Verzekeraars*'. It is worth considering adapting these terms to real life when the project is continued. The direct results lag somewhat behind the expectations for this party, which makes the public-private nature of the reporting line vulnerable, whereas this is an important basis. The project Crimestoppers, which has been operational for almost 15 years, however shows that a positive cost-benefit analysis is possible for private parties.

So as to increase the number of calls, the role of insurers as well as the public-private cooperation as a whole in the project should be explained more explicitly. This role has hardly been highlighted in the media and at the moment it is almost unknown to the public. On the other hand, the '*Verbond van Verzekeraars*' itself might contribute to it by participating in thematic campaigns.

In addition, however, the existence of non-visible effects of M. has to be studied urgently. For the detection or prevention of crime always leads to lesser damage. So the insurers also profit greatly from the calls that are passed on to the police. For example, rolling up a cannabis plantation can prevent fire from breaking out or flooding occurring, for which insurers have to pay. It is moreover possible that a general acceptance of the reporting line inspires fear in potential crooks.

Finally

Citizens see M. as a valuable contribution to the fight against crime. Anonymously reporting a crime is less seen as a form of grassing but more as a civic duty. Due to the increasing call for safety and the broad support of the fight against crime, the project M. seems to correspond very well with the current spirit of the time. There is clearly a need for such a reporting line.

Although it is difficult to make concrete statements about the results of the project, the estimates made on the basis of the study strongly resemble the results of Crimestoppers in England, which has been active for much longer and where, contrary to the M. variety, rewards are offered. Insofar as expectations have been made with regard to the number of calls, the results correspond with these expectations or seem to exceed these. The number of calls can be considerably increased by active nation-wide promotion. When the reporting line exists for a longer time and new successes can be reported, the acceptance and the number of calls will only increase further, provided, however, that the trust in the anonymity continues to exist.

It is very important for a cost-benefit analysis to pay attention to that part of the M. calls labelled as useful that lead to a detection success. This rate is estimated to be 12%. This percentage may actually be increased, among other things as cases need more time than the current study period permitted. Of course, possible side effects, such as a preventive effect of M. or a decrease of the number of regular, non-anonymous laying of information can only be studied in the long term – insofar as possible.

If M. is judged favourably, Blauw Research advises, when the project is continued nation-wide, to make the improvements described above in all stages of the trajectory.