

Threatening and intimidating police officers and employees of the public prosecutor's office

Summary

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December 2013

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Summary

This research deals with situation(s) in which civilians threaten or intimidate government employees in two organisations; the police and the public prosecutor's office and examines the way in which these situations are managed. The central questions are: What is the nature, frequency and consequence of threats against, and the intimidation of police officers and employees of the public prosecutor's office and, what is the actual, desired, and most effective (evidence-based) policy to prevent threats and intimidation, in order to limit the consequences of these acts? This research is commissioned by the Dutch Research and Documentation Centre (WODC).

To answer these research questions, a literature review was conducted, and an online survey was completed by 1,730 employees of the public prosecutor's office and 1,620 police officers. Drawn from this sample, 86 threatened employees were interviewed about their experiences regarding threats and intimidation, and twenty managers and specialists from both two organisations were asked to reflect on how threats and intimidation are managed. In total, 29 cases of instrumental threats were analysed (15 cases for the police and 14 for the public prosecutor's office).

Frequency

We asked respondents whether during the last 12 months, they were exposed to any of the following acts: 'violent threats directed at themselves or their next of kin', 'being followed or otherwise hindered with the intent to scare them' and being subjected to 'intimidation in order to achieve something'. It was revealed that (weighed for the organisation as a whole), 8% of the employees of the public prosecutor's office and 41% of the police officers were exposed to at least one type of threatening or intimidating behaviour¹. Employees in two specific positions have a significantly higher probability of being confronted with these behaviours: 1) Public prosecutors (17% have been threatened or intimidated during the 12 months preceding the survey) and, 2) frontline police officers (56% have been threatened or intimidated in the last year).

Respondents who reported exposure to threatening or intimidating behaviour during the last 12 months were asked about the escalation of threats. That is, did these situation(s) result in actual violence or destruction of personal possessions? Police officers (27%) reported more incidents compared to employees of the public prosecutor's office (3%). The significant difference between the two organisations can easily be explained. Frontline police officers are more likely to encounter uncooperative, angry and/or aggressive civilians face-to-face as part of their duties. Furthermore, police officers tend to live and work in close proximity to (potential) offenders.

Respondents were also asked whether threats and intimidation extended to their private lives. There are two ways in which this can happen: 1) the threats target the direct environment (e.g., when people threaten to hurt an employees' family) or, 2) the threats are related to the job, but employees are exposed to them outside of the working environment (e.g., when offenders follow the employee home and threaten him or her outside working hours). The reported frequency of such threats were 7% and 14% respectively for threatened public prosecutor employees, and 27% and 11% for the threatened police.

Motives and offenders

The motives for threatening or intimidating employees of the public prosecutor's office can be sorted into four main categories: (1) influencing an on-going investigation, (2) influencing a trial by disconcerting an employee, (3) trying to reverse an unfavourable verdict, and, (4) revenge. With regards to threats against police officers, the following motives stood out: (1) keeping the police at a distance, in order to continue criminal or other inappropriate behaviour, (2) revenge, and (3) averting

¹ All percentages are rounded

police action, such as arrest or receiving a fine. Often, the threatening behaviour is directed at the employee, but he or she may not be the specific target. More often, offenders intend to influence the organisation or a work process by their actions, rather than inflicting personal harm on an employee.

According to employees who were exposed to threatening and intimidating behaviour, perpetrators are regularly perceived to be suffering from a mental illness. In addition, problem families and members of serious criminal groups are frequently mentioned. Police officers added criminal youth groups to the list of common offenders. During the interviews, three groups were repeatedly mentioned: professional criminals, criminal youth, and notorious repeat offenders.

Consequences

The survey provided some insight into the consequences of threats and intimidation. Almost three quarters of the respondents working at the public prosecutor's office (74%) and approximately two thirds of the police respondents (64%) reported that the threats and intimidation they experienced did not have any consequences with regards to the way they performed their duties. The case studies showed that work processes are usually unaffected by these acts. The public prosecution is, to some extent, the victor in all the analysed cases, given that all on-going cases continued despite reported incidents. Police officers regret it when offenders are not (more heavily) punished, especially when the threats are accompanied by other offences. This is related to the concept of a 'paradox of threat' that emerged from the interviews. Respondents revealed that implicit, small and (possibly) non-punishable threats can be much more alarming and dangerous than threats which are handled by criminal law.

Exposure to threats and intimidation can decrease the job satisfaction of employees. In some cases, offenders or specific locations are avoided. Exposure to threats and intimidation can also produce considerable psychological consequences. Several aspects of the threat increase the psychological impact: a) when the intent is to cause personal harm, b) when the threats are repeated (systematic threats against the employee) and, 3) when the threats are instigated by an offender or group living in close proximity to the employee. The probability for this latter action being the case is higher for police officers than for public prosecutors. The subjective threat also increases, if threats are received from serious criminals, who give the impression that the threats will be carried out because of their levels of involvement in organized crime, criminal infrastructure, and known personality traits. The same applied to criminals who believed themselves to operate above the law, and for unpredictable (mentally ill) people. The burden also increases when threats target the private life of an employee. Some of the perpetrators seem to be aware that threats directed at the partner or family of an employee can have a devastating impact on the victim.

The actions being taken

The consequences of (serious) instrumental threats are inextricably linked to the organisational response. The survey showed that employees who have been exposed to threats and intimidation are generally satisfied or not dissatisfied with the organisational response (police 79%, public prosecutor's office 93%). The organisational approach towards threats against its employees has a practical and social-emotional side. This is a unity of two parts: measures and objective assessment of the situation serve to give the victim the feeling that their emotions are taken seriously and their safety is guaranteed within acceptable limits. The social process (consultation of and being attentive towards the victim) is as important as the objective quality of interventions. For instance, security measures can also be a mental burden and ending these measures is an important and precarious moment because the victim has to learn feeling safe again without the additional support measures in place.

Within the public prosecutor's department, the synchronization of the social and practical facets is usually managed by following a distinct process. For serious threats, the responsibility lies with the immediate manager of the threatened employee, the Chief Public Prosecutor and the officer in charge of Security, Protection and Crisismanagement (the 'BB&C'er'). Employees who are exposed to

threats and intimidation often evaluate the availability, accessibility and expertise of these BB&C officers positively. Conversely, for the police organisation, the responsibility falls directly onto the immediate manager. The specialists manage the more or less serious threats from a distance or are not directly involved with the police officer who is exposed to the threat(s). As a result, the police organisation has been subject to criticism for not adequately addressing the social-emotional or practical needs of its employees.

Conclusion

In line with previous research, we conclude that exposure to threats and intimidation is a problem for employees of both the public prosecutor's office and the police, which requires an empathetic-based management approach by the respective organisations. By adopting such an approach, these organisations can minimise the impact that threats and intimidation have on their respective employees. Although the police have substantially improved its working methods in this respect and the public prosecutor's office has also made remarkable progress in the last decennium, the current study offers suggestions and recommendations for continued improvement.