
Expensive friendships: what problematic youth groups cost society

Explorative study in a large city



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Summary

reasons for study

Commissioned by the Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Security and Justice, we conducted an experimental study in one municipality on problematic youth groups. The aim was to identify social problems such youth groups can cause, the social costs connected with this and the extent to which the estimated costs are reliable and valid.

problematic youth groups in test municipality

The situation of mid-2015 is the basis for the calculations in this study. At that time, 2 criminal and 3 troublesome youth groups were active. The criminal youth groups have already existed for years and currently consist of a total of 35 boys of about 22 years old. The troublesome groups have been active for two years and comprise a total of 28 boys of about 20 years. Many young people in problematic youth groups have a history of multiple problems and have not (yet) completed their education. They often come from broken families with an unfavourable socio-economic perspective and an unstimulating rearing environment. As a result, possible tendencies to cause social problems are strengthened rather than restrained. Moreover, there are indications of mental and/or psychological problems, making them vulnerable to peer pressure.

defining social costs

Social costs are defined as the welfare effects for various parties in society, caused by the behaviour of problematic youth groups. In addition to costs *resulting* from this behaviour (such as social damage), it involves costs associated with the *response* of the authorities (such as support and punishment of perpetrators) and *prevention* costs (such as a different organisation of the public space). Furthermore, the costs should be traceable to the *group* behaviour and should not directly result from (personal) problems of individual boys.

method

The study is exploratory in nature and focused on providing insight into the most important cost items for which suitable data are available. To that end, several steps were completed. First, an overview of social impacts was made based on scientific literature and interviews with professionals. With the help of this overview a preliminary cost model was drawn up which was discussed with a broad group of experts in the pilot municipality. Based on their insights, the cost model was improved. Subsequently, from various bodies data was retrieved (at client level) to quantify social impacts. Insofar as cost amounts were not directly available, data on young people and/or provided support were translated to costs. The costs were charted for a period of about 5 years. To validate the cost calculations an analysis was made to determine the susceptibility of the results to variations in assumptions. Finally, an independent methodological test was conducted by a scientist with expertise in the area of cost-benefit analysis.

reference groups

The cost calculations were performed for problematic youth groups and for reference youth groups that were matched to the following characteristics: sex, age and district/postcode area. By using reference groups, social costs resulting from problematic *group* behaviour can be isolated as much as possible. The fact is, many social costs are not made solely for young people from the youth groups, but also for other young people with similar backgrounds.

social impact in 3 areas

In the study, nine direct effects of problematic youth groups were identified, divided into three domains. In addition, there are indirect effects between these domains.

Education, employment and income

1. more unauthorised school absence by frequent truancy;
2. more repeating of classes, partly due to more unauthorised school absence;
3. more early school leaving.

These effects result in a lower level of education, which (in time) leads to:

4. lower labour productiveness (wages) and loss of tax revenues;
5. lower employment rate due to a larger distance from the labour market, which could lead to more benefits (unemployment and/or assistance) and/or reintegration efforts;
6. more problematic debts.

Safety

7. more offences and nuisance;
8. more subjective feelings of unsafety of citizens and entrepreneurs who are not themselves victims.

Care and support

9. greater use of care/assistance services due to a less healthy lifestyle (use of alcohol/drugs and involvement in violent incidents) and a care-avoiding attitude (risk of escalation of problems).

social costs

By using data from various sources cost assessments were made of the social costs of both types of problematic youth groups. This mainly concerns costs made in recent years that can be ascribed to young people in these youth groups. Only those costs are taken into account that are additional with respect to the reference groups.

The study estimates that criminal youth groups annually cause an average of approximately 1.9 million euros of social costs per group, that are borne especially by the judiciary. Costs caused by troublesome youth groups involve amounts in the order of 1.5 million euros per group, of which the municipality bears a substantial amount. The calculations per cost category are included in Chapter 6. In total, the social costs in the pilot municipality amount to approximately 8.2 million euros. So these are ‘expensive’ friendships.

The reason for the study was the perceived knowledge gap with regard to the precise social costs of problematic youth groups. It was obvious that such youth groups have large social impacts and this was the reason to develop an integrated approach. This exploratory study is the first to map out the composition and (potential) size of the social costs caused by such youth groups. This insight is important for municipalities and the Ministry of Security and Justice to further optimise the local approach.

discussion

It has been found possible to translate many social effects to costs. Some cost figures are an underestimate because the image of the youth groups in question was not complete. With regard to a number of effects usable data were entirely lacking. Possibly, these p.m. items can be mapped out in a continuation study. In addition, the study period was limited to about 5 years which means ‘lifetime’ effects, with potential substantial cost implications, have not been taken into account.

The calculations were based on data from reliable sources and, where possible, directly related to people. The degree of validity varies and depends on whether use could be made of direct personal data over several years and cost statements from primary sources or not and whether there was a need to elaborate on input derived from other sources.

The susceptibility analysis shows that the major uncertainty is connected with the extent to which corrections can be made for factors other than the group effect. This can have a substantial impact on the social costs (in the order of a fifth to a quarter).

An assessment by an independent expert shows that the method was worked out in a valid and insightful way, and that it contributes to the desired insight into the complex issue of problematic youth groups.