

# Reporting crime to the police: Trends and determinants

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## Abstract

It is of great importance for governments that victims of offenses notify the police and preferably report these crimes.<sup>1</sup> Notifying the police is important so that police have accurate information on crime, whereas reporting crimes is usually necessary to start a criminal investigation. Data from the *Veiligheidsmonitor* seem to suggest that the willingness to report crimes to the police has been declining since 2005 in the Netherlands. The House of Representatives therefore asked the minister to investigate the causes of this decline and the possibilities for increasing the willingness to report crimes.

In order to answer the questions from the House of Representatives, the goal of this study is to collect information to explain the decline in the Dutch citizens' willingness to report crimes. Moreover, based on the outcomes, leads for policies aimed at increasing the willingness to report crimes will be identified if possible. The main research question is: *how can the decline in citizens' willingness to report crimes between 2005 and 2015 be explained?*

First, a literature review on trends and determinants of the willingness to notify the police and to report crimes was carried out. The results from previous studies are not unambiguous. In Dutch studies, declining, increasing, and stable trends were found, whereby the declining trend could be explained by a changed composition of the crimes. In an American study an increasing willingness to report crimes was found, while British and Canadian studies showed a declining willingness to report crimes.

In order to interpret these trends in the willingness to notify the police and to report crimes, it is necessary to have insight into the factors that influence the victim's choice to notify the police and report crimes. The assumption that the decision to report a crime or not is a deliberate choice between two alternatives, is used as a theoretical starting point. When an individual has the choice to report a crime or not, he or she will make a decision based on the

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<sup>1</sup> In this report a distinction is made between notifying the police and reporting to the police. Reporting crimes to the police means that the victim personally signs the official police report, while notifying merely means that the victim communicates to the police that an offense happened to them.

expected benefits and expected costs of each alternative. Consequently, he or she will choose the alternative with the highest expected profit (i.e., expected benefits minus the expected costs). These expected costs and benefits are described as different economic (e.g., material costs and benefits), and psychological (e.g., emotions and attitudes) criteria, which will also possibly be influenced by the victim's position in society and the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim.

Several determinants of reporting crime on the offense, victim, and the regional level have been found in the Dutch and the international literature. Determinants on the offense level in particular have often been shown to have a significant influence on the willingness to report crime. Results regarding characteristics of the victim or the region in which the victim is living are less clear and often insignificant. The literature shows that the seriousness of a crime (i.e., material damage or physical harm), insurance against the damage, and the opportunities to report crime increase the willingness to report crime to the police, which is in line with what can be expected based on the economic criteria. Moreover, the type of crime and the location where the crime took place have been shown to be important determinants for the victim's decision to report a crime or not. It has also often been shown that victims are more willing to report crimes when they have a more positive attitude towards the police. Other associations between victim and regional characteristics that have been found in the literature are not unambiguous and often not significant. Psychological criteria that possibly influence the willingness to report crime (e.g., need for retribution, shame, guilt, social norms of peers) are seldom or never examined.

In order to investigate trends in the willingness to notify the police and to report crimes as well as to study their determinants, data from multiple annual waves of the *Veiligheidsmonitor* (2005-2015) are used. The *Veiligheidsmonitor* includes data on several characteristics and attitudes of victims that have been examined in prior research on crime reporting behavior. With respect to characteristics of offenses, the *Veiligheidsmonitor* includes data on the type of crime, the location of the crime, and the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. Since the *Veiligheidsmonitor* is not specifically designed to study the willingness to notify the police and to report crimes, several other characteristics of offenses are missing that previously have been shown to be very relevant to explain crime reporting behavior, such as the seriousness of the crime, insurance against the damage and available possibilities to report crimes. Moreover, the *Veiligheidsmonitor* does not include any regional characteristics but these are created by aggregating individual characteristics to a regional level.

The trends in the willingness to notify the police and to report crimes are analyzed. These trends show a slight increase in the willingness to notify the police, from 31 percent in 2005 to 34 percent in 2015. The willingness to report crimes, on the other hand, has slightly decreased from 29 percent in 2005 to 26 percent in 2015. When online crime reporting is not taken into account, the willingness to report crimes even decreased to 19 percent in 2015. The trends found in this study differ from those that have been found by Statistics Netherlands. This is the consequence of differences in the calculation of the willingness to notify the police and to report crime, with respect to correcting for methodological differences over time,

handling missing values, and excluding respondents with certain response patterns. Moreover, no trends are observable within the different versions of the *Veiligheidsmonitor*, while there are especially differences in the willingness to notify the police and to report crimes between the different versions of the *Veiligheidsmonitor*. This indicates that the observed trends might be the consequence of methodological differences between consecutive waves of the *Veiligheidsmonitor*. In line with this conclusion, multivariate analyses show that the observed trends disappear when controlling for these methodological differences in the *Veiligheidsmonitor*. The answer to the main question of this study (i.e., *how can the decline in citizens' willingness to report crimes between 2005 and 2015 be explained?*) therefore is that the observed decline in the willingness to notify the police and to report crime are the consequence of methodological differences in the measurement of this willingness over time.

The multivariate analyses further show that especially the characteristics of the offenses contribute to explaining the willingness to notify the police and to report crimes. These characteristics explain approximately 12 and 14 percent of the variance of the willingness to notify the police and to report crimes, respectively. Characteristics of victims and of the regions they live in often show a significant association with reporting crimes, which is possibly the consequence of the large sample size, but explain less than one percent of the variance. Offense characteristics therefore seem particularly relevant for increasing the willingness to notify the police and to report crimes. A possible way to increase this willingness is to stimulate victims of cybercrime to notify the police and to report these crimes. According to victim surveys, the prevalence of cybercrime is increasing but the analyses in this report show that victims of cybercrimes seldom report their victimization to the police. The willingness to notify the police and to report crimes could therefore be greatly increased when victims of these crimes are stimulated to report cybercrime to the police more often.

Finally, in the discussion, the limitations of the current study are discussed and suggestions for future research on the willingness to notify the police and to report crimes are made.