

ILLICIT DRUGS IN FIGURES

Looking for ways to collect national figures about the total amounts of confiscated illicit drugs in the Netherlands

Summary

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SUMMARY

The Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Safety and Justice (WODC) yearly asks the national police to deliver national figures about the total amounts of confiscated illicit drugs in the Netherlands, for the National Drug Monitor as well as for the reports for the *European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction* (EMCDDA) and the *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* (UNODC). These figures however cannot be accurately delivered. Some police units do deliver figures, others do not. Hence, there is no complete national overview.

This finding motivated the WODC to investigate the background of this problem, and especially the question if there are practical ways to collect national figures. This investigation was done by *EMMA – Experts in Media en Maatschappij* (Experts in media and society). This summary offers an answer to the research questions shaping this investigation.

To answer the research questions, we have chosen a qualitative study design. We interviewed representatives of in total seven police units and almost all national parties involved in drug seizures. These are the National information and Organisation service of the National Police (*Dienst Landelijke Informatie Organisatie, DLIO*), the Seizure Intervention Team (*Beslag Interventie Team, BIT*), members of the National Police Board responsible for ‘drugs’, ‘seizure’ and ‘forensic investigation’, State owned Moveable Property from the ministry of Finance (*Domeinen Roerende Zaken, DRZ*), the National Seizure Authority of the Public Prosecution Service (*Landelijke Beslag Autoriteit, LBA*), the Public Prosecutor’s National Office (*Parket-Generaal*), Customs and the Royal Military Police (KMar).¹

1. *In the logistical process of confiscating or taking into custody a drug or batch of drugs, (from the moment of encounter until the moment of actual destruction, including all intermediate proceedings), at which moments is information about the amount and nature of the drug currently registered?*

Information about the amount and nature of confiscated drugs is registered in different ways and at different moments. This (naturally) is done in the police force’s system for process registration, the *Basisvoorziening Handhaving* (BVH), but also for instance in Summ-IT, if confiscation leads to or becomes part of an investigation where the Criminal Investigation Department is involved. We can also find information on the paper Notification of Seizure (*Kennisgeving van Inbeslagname, Kvl*), on pdf’s from the Dutch Forensic Institute (NFI), in the National Trace Tracking System (*Landelijk Sporen Volgsysteem, LSV*) and in local software or data management systems, such as Excel, of the police units. The information these systems hold is, however, usually incomplete. In the ICT-system of the State Owned Moveable Property (*Beslagportaal*), it is mostly logistical information that is registered, even though *DRZ* claims to keep track of how many cannabis cultivation sites are dismantled and what has been confiscated in the process. How much cannabis has been confiscated in the dismantlement of cannabis cultivation sites is nationally

¹ This research is not a screening of the (functioning of the) police force in terms of drug seizures. All facts and findings incorporated in this report, come from interviews with individuals and do not necessarily constitute a reflection of the police force procedures.



registered in the national cannabis monitor. This monitor is based on separate registrations of these dismantlements, maintained by the units.

- 2. Which information is registered, when and by whom? Is there a difference in the way large amounts of drugs, small amounts of drugs and cannabis plants/cuttings/tops are registered? Are there differences between police units?*

Many different individuals register information on drug seizures. It can be the police officer who first sets up the BVH-registration (and is the only one authorized to change the original record in a later stadium). It can also be other police force employees who add information to newly created *records of goods* (goederenkaart) in BVH. Employees of the Forensic Department do not always process mutations in BVH, but they do process them in Summ-IT and, usually, on the paper Kvl. Employees of the drug storage locations do make mutations in BVH.

Respondents note that, when it comes to registration, there are differences between processing large and small amounts. Several police units in the Netherlands are running a pilot to process amounts for personal use with less administrative burden.

Cannabis cultivation sites are cleared by special teams that are commissioned by *Domeinen Roerende Zaken*. They count and/or weigh the plants, tops and remaining leaves and register that information. The police officer then makes a Kvl in BVH.

There are many differences between the police units, as becomes clear from the interviews. It is clear that there are no standards of practice being used to enter information in BVH. The separate systems that are used by police units themselves, and are thus not connected to BVH, also differ greatly. We have found such systems at the Forensic Department, and at drug storage locations.

- 3. Which definitions are used? In which measuring units is registered? Are the purity of a confiscated drug and/or moisture taken into account (in registering the weight of a confiscated amount of drugs)? If so, how?*

We establish that, if the confiscated drugs (the complete amount) go through a Forensic Department or the Dutch Forensic Institute (NFI), the measurement is done correctly and properly. But even then, the cutting and the 'strength' of the pills is not (always) established. However, in that case, type of drug and often also the (encountered) amount are always established in a precise, valid and reliable manner. If the drugs do not pass the Forensic Department or the NFI, then the identification and weighing or counting is done by the police officer only. If, indeed, they were done. Because it also happens that many small amounts for personal use, or, in fact, very large amounts are not counted or weighed at all. If this is the case, it is with good reason, for instance if safety is at stake and there is no (possible) suspect. The weighing or counting by the police officer is almost always a gross weighing or a rough count, in the sense that any kind of unit can be found in the registration system, such as pellets, ponypacks, bars, boxes, blocks, et cetera. In those cases, the weight of packing material is usually included. An estimate of half the confiscated hard drugs is in principle only registered by the police officer, in which case it is clear that this is quite often not done very



precisely.² It usually concerns amounts for personal use or seizures that for some reason do not lead to prosecution.

Because the volumetric mass density of cannabis can differ strongly, in the national cannabis monitor a standard average weight per plant is used.

4. *What is the validity, accuracy and reliability of the information in the different systems?*

As it turns out, reports from BVH about amounts of confiscated drugs are, in general, not reliable and not (always) valid. For the purposes for which the figures are used, the accuracy can be labelled adequate. The 'contamination' in the printouts can be so severe however, that the results do not reflect an accurate national view that can be used for monitoring purposes. This contamination is a consequence of incomplete or incorrect registrations, and of often incorrectly processed mutations in the registrations. Moreover, there seems to be a difference between police units when it comes to the extent to which this contamination takes place. With a lot of effort, reliable and valid data *can* be obtained from BVH (and potentially, also the paper Kvl's), but this requires a large amount of manual work.

We label the data from BVH as sufficiently accurate, because in producing national figures, a high degree of accuracy is not required. It is quite irrelevant whether it is 1 or 1,1 kilo's that is confiscated. As long as the inaccuracy does not fluctuate unpredictably, and remains within certain margins (that are to be determined). We see no reason to assume that the moistness varies, nor the cutting or the amount of packing material that is included in the weighing. The registration of cannabis in the national cannabis monitor is labelled reliable and valid, albeit that for figures about 'regular' seizures of cannabis, (in other words, when it does not concern the dismantlement of cultivation sites) the same limitations in terms of registration apply as to other drugs.

5. *Who controls the information? Is the information public? How long does the information remain available?*

The information at the national police is controlled at the level of police units by the Regional Information Organisation Services (*Diensten Regionale Informatie Organisatie. DRIO*). At the national level, this is done by the aforementioned *Dienst Landelijke Informatie Organisatie*. If by controlling we also mean processing mutations, we can say that all 60 thousand police officers have the ability to enter information into BVH. Due to a lack of standardised procedures, this results in an unwanted multiplicity of registered information.

There are no indications that the legal maximum retention and limitation periods are exceeded. Essential information, including the Kvl's, remains in the system, and/or are preserved separately in folders. This information is not public, unless there is media coverage, in case of for instance a big catch.

6. *Is there a point in the process from which the WODC could derive information on confiscated drugs on a national level? What is the validity, accuracy and reliability of this information?*

Reliable, accurate and probably also valid figures on drug seizures at a regional level are available from the Forensic Departments from, in any case, a couple of police units. Possibly, this number will increase if the

² In case of soft drugs, identification is seldom a problem. Dismantlements of cannabis cultivation sites in any case follow a different route in terms of process and registration, and lead to prosecution much more often.



Forensic Departments get access to a gas chromatograph with a mass spectrometer (NFIDENT) so that they themselves can determine which of the four most common drugs are present in the confiscated powder or pill. Valid, sufficiently precise and reliable figures on drug seizures can also be found at Customs and KMar. *The Hit and Run Cargo Team* (the HARC-team) Rotterdam and KMar's Drugs Team Schiphol keep track of what is intercepted at the most important sea- and airports in the Netherlands. Lists maintained by drug storage locations of what goes into, and comes out of the vaults are sometimes useful for deriving information, but do seldom suffice when it comes to validity, accuracy and reliability. Cannabis dismantlement's are registered in separate excel overviews, and subsequently registered in the national cannabis monitor.

7. *Could the WODC collect information at different points and extrapolate it in order to create a national overview? What would this method look like?*

The unofficial, selfmade lists that are kept by Customs, KMar and at least some Forensic Departments, and drug storage locations, can be used to draw up a national view. Prerequisite is that enough lists are found, from various locations well spread around the country, that make possible a sufficiently reliable estimate of missing data. In that case, a national overview of sufficient quality can be constructed.

8. *If the answers to questions 6 and 7 are negative, are there other ways to come to national figures/data or estimates (think for instance of text-mining in BVH)?*

The answers to questions 6 and 7 are not negative, but according to respondents text-mining currently does not seem to be a suitable method to achieve a national view of sufficient quality. The most important reason for this that the source (BVH) is too contaminated right now to be able to obtain reliable and valid data from it, although this differs among police units. Moreover, a lot of knowledge and experience is needed to use text-mining to access the needed data in BVH. The police force currently seems to lack the capacity to do this.

9. *Which bottlenecks does the WODC currently need to take into account if it would move towards a form of 'derivation' or estimation?*

This report shows that, given the current situation, it would be better to assume an incomplete, but fairly correct view (the unofficial, self-made lists) than a more complete, but in most police units inaccurate view (BVH). This however presents a bottleneck: should the WODC, as a governmental institution, choose to assume the incomplete but correct view, this means it should rely on unauthorized and, in fact, unofficial sources. For the supplying police units as well as for the WODC this seems to be an unwanted, or at least far from ideal situation that is by all means not sustainable. Moreover, to create a national view the WODC than has to estimate the lacking information.

10. *Given the current state of the information available on a regional and national level: to what extent can the specifications that the questionnaires from the EMDCCA and the UN ask for be completed?*

Given the current nature of the (available and released) information, questionnaires from the EMDCCA and the UN cannot be completed. That, in fact, was the motivation for this investigation. If we look at what is possible with the unreleased but registered information, we can state that it should be possible to complete the questionnaires concerning the type of drug and the amount, with the exception of batches for which that information is not registered such as seal bags containing multiple amounts of drugs for personal use. This would however take a lot of time. Not one police unit seems to be prepared right now to invest the necessary capacity.



The requested case information is specifically hard to obtain. For that, police reports should be manually examined. The requested information (including type and amount of drugs) cannot be obtained in an authorized and systematic way from the Public Prosecution Service.

All in all, we can state that when it comes to obtaining national data on amounts of drugs, two issues play a significant role. These are priority, and (needed) quality of the data.

If high(er) priority would be given to the acquirement of national figures of high (or acceptable) quality, it is in fact possible to derive those figures from the ICT-system BVH. Prerequisite would then be that BVH is standardised and consistently filled and analysed. Currently, police units differ in the way they handle this. According to respondents, in many police units the protocol for registration of confiscated illicit drugs is sometimes discarded for different, but legitimate, reasons.

The quality, as well as the completeness of figures currently produced, differ strongly among police units and among drug storage locations. The quality at Forensic Departments can be deemed high, but the completeness cannot. The information that could be obtained from some of the drug storage locations is generally of lower quality. The quality of (automatically obtained) data from BVH is currently, nationally speaking, low, but differs per police unit and depends on the amount of time that is spent obtaining it.