Interpretation of problematic youth group behaviour

Summary

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Summary and conclusions

This fourth chapter is a summary that may be read in lieu of a comprehensive read. In the first section, the context, the research questions and the execution of the study are discussed; in the next section, the research questions are answered. The final part of this chapter provides a contemplative conclusion based on the findings of this study.

Context, research questions and execution

Offending behaviour in adolescence occurs mainly in groups; accordingly, youth groups, nuisance-causing conduct and crime follow on from each other. Until 2015, the shortlist methodology was used to interpret the nature and severity of offending behaviour of youth groups in the public domain.[1] Youth groups were classified as bothersome, nuisance-causing or criminal. Since 2015, a new methodology is being used: the group scan. Since in this, groups are no longer classified as bothersome, nuisance-causing or criminal, also the work process to come to an approach has changed. The new work process has seven steps, the first three of which are most significant for an interpretation of problematic youth group behaviour: 1) sharing signs of problematic group conduct, 2) deciding on additional information to be gathered and 3) deciding to describe a comprehensive picture of the group. Unlike before, the municipal process director now works on a draft action plan that ideally comprises information from the municipality, from youth work and from the police group scan. Where there are prospects of conviction or a greater role for criminal law aspects, information of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) may be added.

Group classification based on the shortlist methodology used to – largely – determine the action plan and which parties would direct and take charge of it. Now that the shortlist methodology is no longer being used, there is a need for interpretation at the level of group behaviour and dynamics, risks, impact and

opportunities. This may subsequently be used to shape the process controls for the approach. This can be translated into the following problem definition:

> *'How can local partners give a uniform interpretation of problematic group beha-viour, its relationship with the living environment and the conduct of members in the group? How can this interpretation contribute to the coordination between partners in the chain regarding the tasks and responsibilities involved in dealing with a group?'*

The research question was translated into theoretical/scientific questions and more practice-oriented questions:

Theoretical/scientific questions
1. Taking into account the most up-to-date insights, what classifications of group behaviour and dynamics may be used?
2. What consequences can group behaviour have on the immediate living envi-ronment (the district/neighbourhood)?
3. How is insight gained in factors that may affect future delinquent behaviour of these – problematic – youth groups?

Practice-oriented questions
1. Who is or are in charge of providing interpretation?
2. Wat is a logical way to set up the interpretation process, or: when and by whom should what information be made available to sufficiently establish what the issues are and what information or involvement is not needed, or not yet?
3. Should any weighing factors be considered in the elaboration, and if so, which?
4. What kind of guidance can the local field be given to interpret a youth group?
5. Based on the interpretation, what may be said about the tasks and responsibi-lities of partner(s) for the approach?
6. Is there a need or further need of knowledge and insights, a single language, or for local partners to acquire skills? If so, what need?

To answer the theoretical/scientific research questions, scientific literature publis-hed between 2012 and 2017 was used. Scientific databases were used to take stock of this; in addition, stakeholders with a clear understanding of the current literature supplied documentation. To answer the more practice-oriented question, discourse was sought, in various ways, with the practical and research field. Annex 1 to this report offers a list of activities carried out and persons interviewed in this respect.

Answering research questions

This study has a scientific/theoretical component and a practice-oriented component (section 4.1). In the following subsections, descriptive answers are provided to the questions belonging to those two components.

Scientific theoretical questions

In the literature, group behaviour and dynamics are defined in different ways. This is partly shown by the great diversity of terms used for youth groups and how those terms are elaborated. This has made the results of studies difficult to compare; depending on the definitions used, these may not always dovetail with or be recognised in practice. Accordingly, empirical research offers no handholds for a choice of one or another classification of problematic youth group behaviour. This is why, in the current study, a choice was made to take stock of the impact of group behaviour on the living environment and the risk factors for future delinquent behaviour of youth groups in particular from the Dutch context – i.e. in particular starting out from the research into problematic youth groups.

The impact of youth groups on the environment may be approached from an "us and them" perspective, setting the neighbourhood and/or the local government against a youth group (conflict situation). Where a conflict situation occurs, people start thinking in groups, with people belonging to a different group than one's "own" (the "out-group") being treated more negatively. In a behavioural sense, this impacts how members of the various groups (consciously or unconsciously) behave to each other. In the case of problematic youth group behaviour this may lead to nuisance, harassment or violence to other groups or people in the neighbourhood. Incidentally, from a perspective of behavioural psychology it may be noted that the impact youngsters have on each other peaks in adolescence, then gradually declines. Statistics on the impact of youth group nuisance on objective (number of offences committed) and subjective safety (sense of safety) are not available. However, qualitative research shows that the impact of youth groups on the living environment and social cohesion can be extremely high. In particular in regard to the 'heavier' youth groups, for example, it is recorded that these literally took over the neighbourhood, with citizens too afraid of repercussions to make reports any longer, and the authorities unable to deal with the issues adequately. This may result in residents and entrepreneurs leaving the neighbourhood, which may promote its deterioration.

Almost no research into the factors related to the appearance and disappearance of youth groups is available; accordingly, it is largely unknown what affects future delinquent behaviour of youth groups. Case studies of eight violent youth groups and international research do offer some insight into items that correlate with structural crime and nuisance. These items focus on behaviour in the neighbourhood, group composition, relationships with administrative parties and

forms of crime. Examples are territorial behaviour and targeted intimidation of citizens, entrepreneurs and the authorities, involvement in mid-level and serious crime, the existence of several 'generations' in a group and a great age difference between group members.

Practice-oriented questions

The practice-oriented questions focus on various aspects of interpreting youth group behaviour: how the interpretation process is organised, the substantive interpretation, implications for the approach. These aspects will be discussed separately.

Organisation of the interpretation process

In the new work process, three steps are related to interpretation (section 4.1). Signals emitted by the various parties – including the police, youth workers, the municipality and municipal services – may lead to the conclusion that there are concerns about the behaviour of a youth group. Where this is the case, the municipality is in charge of applying to the police for a group scan. This means that, where there are concerns about a group, the municipality is director of information gathering. Before the group scan is carried out, a list of group members is drawn up. The police and the municipality bear joint responsibility for this. The actual group scan offers the option to add information from the police registration systems and the local beat officer. The municipal director works on a draft plan of action based on information from the municipality, youth work and the police (group scan), to be supplemented – should there be prospects of conviction or a greater role for criminal law aspects – with information of the PPS.

All this means that local parties bear joint responsibility for the interpretation of problematic youth group behaviour. One should note that a picture constructed on the basis of comprehensive information is a precondition for correct interpretation. Some of the interviews held show that this precondition is not always met. The police sometimes conducts only a limited group scan, incorporating only digital data from the police systems; no street information is used in such a case, which may promote an incorrect or incomplete picture of the group in question. In addition, youth workers – usually working under the municipality's supervision – are still insufficiently equipped to gather and record information and to make it accessible. Although the PPS works in conformity with the work process, in practice the idea is that it could, maybe sometimes, do more. Specifically, parties in the field express the wish that the PPS gather information on the group or its members and be present in consultations about groups even in the absence of prospects of conviction or a greater role for criminal law aspects.

The case studies show that information gathered is interpreted in group meetings chaired by the municipalities. Which organisations attend these meetings varies: besides representatives of the municipality, the police, youth work and local beat officers as constant factors, also family coaches, school attendance officers, person-oriented approach (PGA) directors, coordinators or PPS staff may attend. In this way, oral explanations of any information supplied may be given, missing information can be spotted, and other information judged of insufficient quality for a solid evaluation of the severity of issues can be identified. Incidentally, it is important that information on an individual level be not given access to until a youth group has been prioritised by the triangle; until that time, therefore, only information and interpretation on the group level should be provided.

Substantive interpretation

Without the triple label (nuisance-causing, bothersome and criminal) it has become harder for professionals to determine which group or groups should be given extra attention, and what means and capacity the chosen approach will require. In practice, equivalents of the label are still too often relied on – without use being made of clearly demarcated criteria, however. This may affect the prioritisation of the plan of action regarding youth groups and become decisive for the choice of intervention. This illustrates the need to create clear guidance for the interpretation of problematic youth group behaviour. A precondition for this is that it be accessible, easy to apply and not mandatory. Based on the scientific literature and interviews conducted with professionals, (possible) items for interpretation may be distinguished.

In view of the wish and/or the need for prioritisation, monitoring and a plan of action, it seems important to introduce some weighing factor into the guide, for example in the form of the degree of prevention or the severity. At the same time, the conversations held reveal a strong need to provide the interpretation with a *couleur locale* (by using some items but not others, for example). This is in line with the notion that the conduct of youth groups or individual group members may be viewed as problematic in the one municipality, whereas in the other, the same conduct is not classified as problematic. Such local differences mean that comparison of the various issues with youth groups between municipalities – sometimes termed benchmarking – is no longer possible.

Implications for the approach

A guide can be helpful in determining the possibilities and impossibilities of the approach chosen and the parties that have to play a part therein. After all, the municipal director can use this as a framework for an interpretative description of a youth group. He or she will make this based on comprehensive information or,

as the case may be, on information from various parties. An interpretation of a youth group may produce a picture of the severity, risks, development and impact of that youth group and reveal the contours of a possible approach. Concretely, this means that it becomes clear whether the group as a whole should be targeted, or the domain and/or the individual members of the group. An interpretation may also provide ideas about any need to involve, for example, school attendance officers, partners from the care domain, municipal supervisors, youth work, the PPS and, in its wake, investigative services.

This study shows that in various areas, the need for knowledge, insight and a single language is felt. Where knowledge and insight are concerned it turns out that parties are still insufficiently aware of the position of the police group scan and its role inside the comprehensive action plan. This means that it is important to do some expectation management in regard to this instrument and the information it may yield. Municipal directors may play a part in this as experience experts, for example by explaining how a draft plan of action is made and what resources are or may be used for it. The Dutch Centre for Crime Prevention and Public Safety (Centrum voor Criminaliteitspreventie en Veiligheid CCV) might play a part in this.

The guide as such may be viewed as a checklist to get a comprehensive picture of a youth group and to gain insights about missing information and partners that may become involved in the approach. A single language may be achieved by adding a short description to the interpretative items in the guide, in the shape of an insert. Ultimate use of the guide requires that it has administrative support; this will also have to be achieved, therefore.

Reflection

The sources from science and practice that were consulted provided a view of a great variety of items that may be used in picturing and interpreting problematic youth group behaviour. In the past, there was a place for such interpretation using labels (nuisance-causing, bothersome and criminal); however, this does insufficient justice to the complex behaviour of youth groups in the context in which this takes place. Above all, interpretative items constitute a practical tool for good and solid comprehensive information gathering on a local level. This information gives direction both to the approach and to the parties that could or should be involved therein.

With a view to prioritising or monitoring youth groups, based on a selection of interpretative items a descriptive picture of a youth group may be provided. What specific interpretative items are used in this may be determined by the municipal director in consultation with the partners. Topics that, based on these items, seem to have to be discussed are the severity, risks, development and impact of youth

groups on the environment. This offers members of the local triangle an insight in the use of and need for an approach (prioritisation) and its contours. The findings of this study were used to make a first attempt at a guide; in the future, based on experiences from practice, this can be made more explicit.

Endnotes

1   In other words, the focus is on problematic youth group behaviour in the street. Youth groups that only exhibit problematic behaviour online are outside the scope of this study.