



Lessons from (evaluation) research into law enforcement

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Research issues and policy relevance

What have we learnt from two years of evaluation studies in the field of law enforcement? Swamped by policy studies, performance measurements and evaluation studies, many policymakers cannot see the woods for the trees. In response, WODC carried out a research synthesis based on 31 (evaluation) studies that were published between 2002 and 2004 in the field of law enforcement, commissioned by the Ministry of Justice (Klein Haarhuis, Van Ooyen-Houben, Kleemans & Leeuw 2005).

Method

This synthesis focused on the following issues:

- 1 What types of interventions (policy measures) are involved in these studies?
- 2 How should the quality of these studies be assessed?
- 3 How can the substantive results from these studies be synthesised?

The approach used unites two different schools of thought, the Campbell approach that emphasises the methodological quality of the underlying research (e.g. Farrington & Welsh 2005), and the 'realist synthesis' approach that emphasises opening the 'black box' of policy interventions: what makes a particular policy cause a particular result, how is this realised, for whom, and under which conditions (e.g. Pawson 2002)? By focusing on these working mechanisms, key insights can also be derived from research that does not meet the highest quality standards. Furthermore, lessons can be drawn from research in other policy areas (with comparable interventions).

Key findings

The first thing to note is that most of the interventions are not directly aimed at individuals but at institutional actors, organisations, or sometimes even the entire law enforcement chain. The selected studies disclose the Ministry of Justice' diverse and complex governing relationships with society. Therefore, a typology of evaluation studies has been developed that acknowledges the various types of interventions and the ways in which these interventions can be evaluated: project evaluations, organisation(al) evaluations, chain evaluations, and evaluations of legislation and regulations.

Project evaluations

Projects in the field of law enforcement often comprise a greater input of manpower, expertise and means, and an intensification of cooperation. The police and the Public Prosecution service are often actively involved in the projects. A number of projects involve extra governance or negotiation. Better information and the enhanced use of enforcement tools should in turn lead to, amongst other things, more investigations, arrests, convictions and eventually in an increased risk of apprehension for offenders, and thus less crime.

The synthesis of project evaluations showed, amongst other things, that the intended intensification of enforcement efforts has been realised in many cases, and that the intended 'production' – e.g. in the form of communication-related activities, arrests or criminal investigations – has gone up. However, the final goals, in terms of the intended results of the projects, do not yet seem to have been reached.

In addition, it appears that existing organisations are often reluctant to pick up on the activities involved in the new projects. This could be an example of the well known 'knowledge-attitude-behaviour problem': the project expertise gained through communication in an organisation does not necessarily mean that this expertise will actually be put into practice. Furthermore, in several projects, new initiatives were not easily embedded in the existing work processes.

Chain evaluations

Chain evaluations usually comprise the entire law enforcement chain from prevention, investigation and prosecution up to and including the application of sanctions. The interventions often concern the introduction of new regulations, enforcement instruments and methods, and the improvement of the communication and cooperation between chain partners. This should lead to better investigation and prosecution results and eventually to less crime.

Amongst other things, the studies found systematic bottlenecks that keep emerging in different forms, in particular:

- Lack of integral management of the organisations;
- Insufficient coordination between chain partners and with external partners;
- Lack of uniformity in policy between chain partners (different styles, working methods, policy cycles, and priorities);
- A lack of organisational capacity;
- Insufficient expertise (level of training);
- Too much focus on fighting crime, to the detriment of prevention and the acquisition of knowledge.

These bottlenecks prevent policy mechanisms from working in practice as intended. Furthermore, it appears that the organisation and the execution of law enforcement are below standard. At the municipal level, for example, a great deal is being tolerated. In general, the chain structure is characterised by many inefficiencies. Additionally, both the policies and the evaluations seem to have a blind spot. Law enforcement policy is about the compliance behaviour of citizens and organisations, yet many interventions, and also many evaluation studies, fail to target this directly. The focus primarily concerns the effects of policy interventions on the enforcement chain rather than the end effects on compliance behaviour.

Literature

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