



## SUMMARY

**U**se of weapons among youths has increased considerably in recent years. The number of stabbing incidents involving youths is growing and perpetrators of these incidents are getting younger. In order to reduce these problems and to protect youths from becoming perpetrators and victims, the Weapons and Youth Action Plan was drawn up in 2020. It involved 20 municipalities, the Centre for Crime Prevention and Safety, the Halt organisation, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Public Prosecution Service, the Police, Child Protection Services, Juvenile Rehabilitation and Protection Services, and the Association of Dutch Municipalities, under the leadership of the Ministry of Justice and Security. The objective of the action plan is to decrease the use and ownership of weapons among youths in a period of two years (2021 and 2022). The plan contains 16 actions to serve this purpose.

This report contains an evaluation of the action plan. In the plan evaluation, we examine how the action plan was established and on the basis of which assumptions the chosen actions contribute to the main objective. In the process evaluation, we describe the implementation of the action plan by the municipalities and the government. Which actions have municipalities implemented, and how? What did municipalities encounter during the implementation and how do they look back on it? Subsequently, we will discuss the results.

### Research Method

For this evaluation, interviews were conducted with the authors of the action plan from the Ministry of Justice and Security. In addition, 16 municipalities participating in the action plan were selected. Each of these municipalities sent relevant policy documents or referred to documents in the council information system. Furthermore, interviews were held with relevant officials and staff of chain partners. A total of 38 professionals were interviewed. In addition, we conducted an exploratory literature study to map the (inter)national literature on weapons and youths and to gain insight into the motives of youths for carrying weapons.

### Plan Evaluation: Creation of the Action Plan

The gravity of the problems and the concerns among local administrators demanded a rapid political response. Hence, the action plan was developed in a short time period. The authors drew up the plan in approximately three to four months, with input from municipalities and relevant national organisations. In addition, scientific sources and the knowledge and experience of the authors of the action plan were used. However, no prior analysis of the target group and how to reach it was carried out. Due to the short duration of the action plan (two years), actions and measures that require a longer-term investment (in time or money) were not included in the plan. This mainly concerned preventive actions, such as measures aimed at empowering vulnerable at-risk youth.

### Literature

An exploration of scientific literature shows that causes and motives of knife possession



among youths can be explained at different levels: social, situational, and psychological. We can distinguish the following causes and motives that lead to youths carrying or using a weapon: (perception of) unsafety as a result of which youths switch to self-protection, wanting to raise their status within a subgroup, being the victim of violence or having experienced it up close, personality traits and factors in upbringing.

These factors are not isolated but interrelated. An example of this is the observation Weerman et al. make, where youths try to raise their status in order to feel safer.<sup>i</sup> These youths believe that they are less at risk if they have a violent reputation. In this case, the motives of status and security influence each other. Moreover, the choice for self-protection, i.e. the reasoning 'Having a knife in my pocket makes me feel safer', also appears to be related to a lack of trust in institutions such as the police and government. The motive to carry weapons is influenced by various contextual factors and the different motives reinforce each other. This results in a complex set of factors that can ultimately lead to carrying or using a stabbing weapon.

Successful intervention requires insight into the living environment of youths (incl. weapon owners), into what drives them, and requires an investment in reaching this group. The main motive for youths to carry a weapon is the perceived sense of safety. On the other hand, an increase in stabbing weapons on the streets makes that specific neighbourhood less safe. Breaking this cycle requires intervention in the perceived sense of insecurity and insight into the step from 'feeling unsafe' to 'I'm safer when carrying a stabbing weapon'.

### **Process Evaluation: Implementation of the Action Plan**

The actions from the action plan have been implemented in different ways. This is due to the various levels of the actions; some actions were very to the point and could easily be implemented, while other actions were more abstract and required further interpretation by the municipalities. As a result, a number of actions were carried out in a comparable manner by almost all the municipalities included in the study, while other actions were interpreted differently. In addition, some actions required a commitment from the Ministry of Justice and Security.

#### *Mandatory Actions*

All participating municipalities have committed themselves to carrying out four actions: raising awareness through information classes given by Halt, weapon collection campaigns, gaining insight into at-risk youth, and risk identification and early intervention. These actions have been carried out in almost all municipalities.

#### *Other Locally Implemented Actions*

The other local actions have been implemented and carried out in municipalities, with or without support from national partners. For example, the awareness campaigns 'You choose' and 'Drop your knife' were developed nationally so that all municipalities could use them. In addition, there are actions, such as locker checks and weapons checks in the

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<sup>i</sup> Weerman, F.M., R. A. Roks, J. B. A. van den Broek & J.C. Willink (2022). *Het is een probleem, maar niet voor mij [It is a problem, but not to me]*. Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam.



nightlife industry, which were often already implemented in municipalities before the action plan came into force. Many municipalities have increased the intensity of these actions after activation of the action plan.

Municipalities have not carried out all the actions. In some municipalities the implementing parties did not have sufficient capacity and therefore actions with low expectations were chosen not to implement. For example, in the prevention of the sale of knives to minors. This action has been taken up nationally by the Ministry of Justice and Safety, a bill has been tabled to prohibit the sale of knives to minors in physical and online shops, and national agreements have been made with retail chains. Many municipalities have been awaiting the results of these talks, and only a few municipalities have acted on this at a local level.

### **Nationally Supported Actions**

At a national level, a number of actions have been deployed to support the municipalities in implementing the action plan. For example, a Weapons and Youths Action Plan Toolbox was made available on the website of the Centre for Crime Prevention and Safety to support municipalities in implementing the action plan. Especially smaller municipalities were able to benefit from the knowledge and experience made available.

Furthermore, an exploratory study explored the legal possibilities to remind parents of their responsibility in a more coercive way. In a letter to the Dutch House of Representatives, the Minister in particular referred to the British approach to parents in relation to their child's offences. No final decision has been made on subject this yet. In addition, no proposal has yet been submitted for the action to remove online videos either. However, the Ministry of Justice and Security has requested various studies into the design and effectiveness of such a legislative amendment.

Legislative changes are a lengthy bureaucratic process that cannot simply be accelerated. The action plan can be implemented largely independently of the relevant legislative changes. In some cases, municipalities themselves have taken up the actions that would be completed by a change in the law.

### **Action Plan Results**

The measures to which municipalities have committed themselves, have largely been implemented. Several of the other local and national actions have not been implemented in about half of the municipalities.

Respondents are positive about cooperation within municipalities. The motivation to implement actions from the plan is generally high. In some municipalities the implementation by chain partners is lagging behind, often due to insufficient resources, but also due to COVID and insufficient capacity.

### *Reaching Target Group*

The expectation is that the target group has actually been reached thanks to the information classes given by Halt. In many municipalities, youth workers indicate they are



able to actually reach the target group consisting of youths who carry and possibly use weapons. Youths belonging to the target group of the action plan are generally very active on social media and this sometimes leads to physical confrontations. In most municipalities there is little insight into activities of youths on social media. There is a lack of tools, expertise and capacity to properly monitor social media.

### **Bottlenecks in Implementation**

Important bottlenecks in the implementation are: a lack of (specialised) employees, a lack of capacity, political and administrative unfeasibility, the absence of the problems some actions address, and municipalities waiting on national agreements or measures. Not carrying out some actions may have consequences for the effects that are to be achieved with the action plan. It is not known whether all actions are effective against ownership of weapons among youths. Not implementing one or more (ineffective or less effective) actions does not necessarily mean that the effectiveness of the local approach is reduced.

Another bottleneck is that raising awareness about violence involving weapons can reinforce feelings of unsafety among the at-risk youth. The awareness campaign and the results of the weapons' collection campaigns could give youths the impression that everyone is carrying a knife, and that they should do so as well for self-protection.

Municipalities expect that weapon ownership will continue to need attention in the coming years. This also applies to possession of firearms, which is said to be increasing among youths in some municipalities. The increase is not only the result of youths feeling unsafe. Social disadvantage and feelings of inferiority are also said to play a role. There is a plea for preventive measures in which the starting point should be the question *why* youths who carry weapons feel so unsafe and believe they are underprivileged.

### **Conclusions**

The action plan was urgent because a number of mayors in particular expressed major concerns. Politics and society demanded 'decisiveness' and speed of action. As a result, the action plan was written in a short period of time (three to four months). A phenomenon analysis was performed, but it was decided not to perform options such as a baseline measurement, testing existing policy for effectiveness, a further analysis of the target group, and youths' motives for carrying a weapon.

As a result, the target group of the action plan was not clearly defined and it was unclear how to reach this group. In other words, it was not known at the outset who these youths carrying weapons were, what their motives were, and how their behaviour could be changed. Due to this lack of focus, municipalities had difficulty implementing some actions, and for other actions they questioned whether they would reach the target group, hence questioning the effectiveness of the action concerned. For some actions it has even been indicated that they might have a reverse effect.

One positive effect of the action plan and the development process is that it created momentum for tackling ownership and use of weapons among youths. Participating municipalities agree that it has created a strong boost. A number of municipalities carried



out local research, thus increasing the knowledge of the target group. When these studies showed that an action would not be effective or even counter-productive, these municipalities stopped implementing these actions.

A quantitative goal of the action plan was to achieve a 25% decrease in the number of stabbing incidents in participating municipalities. These figures are not yet published. There is some indication of the direction in which this figure is moving: the municipalities of Rotterdam and The Hague have published figures that indicate a stabilisation in the number of stabbing incidents among youths. The goal, a decrease of 25%, seems a long way off.

A qualitative goal of the action plan was to change the motives for carrying weapons. This was supposed to be achieved, among other things, by the actions 'gaining insight into the youths who carry weapons', 'information classes by Halt' and 'removing feelings of unsafety'. These actions were taken up by the municipalities, but because of the lack of insight and focus on the target group, it is unclear how and if these actions reached youths carrying weapons. Several professionals indicate that there is a risk that these actions not only fail to reach the target group, but even have the opposite effect: the attention to knife violence could reinforce feelings of unsafety among at-risk youth, and feeling unsafe is a major reason for switching to carrying a weapon.

To actually achieve a behavioural change in the group that already carries a weapon, or where the risk is high, in-depth and positive contact with at-risk youth is needed. One of the limited ways to get in touch with the risk group is to get close to them and build a relationship of trust. This measure, which is usually implemented by youth workers, is not specifically mentioned in the action plan, but seems to be a promising one. However, this does require a close look at how youth workers are deployed and what specific action is required to reach this group.

The results of the national campaigns were limited. While the expectations of municipalities for the implementation of the action plan were high, national actions simmered for a long time, possibly partly as a result of the COVID pandemic or due to procedures that require a long lead time. Municipalities, however, are pushing for progress.

## Finally

The action plan's initiative is good, but its implementation lacks focus. Many actions in the action plan are aimed at a broad target group, in some cases at the entire population or all youths. This can be compared to a shotgun blast that happens to hit a young person belonging to the high-risk group, but lacks precision:

- The awareness campaign has been deployed widely, targeting the general public. However, campaigns are only effective if they target the most at-risk group using weapons, and as part of an intensive, local approach to the group with the most problems.
- Monitoring actions (locker checks at schools, stop and search actions in designated areas and weapons checks in the nightlife industry) were also widely deployed and may have reached youths from the target group.



- Information classes by Halt: aimed at all school-going youths. Despite the fact that lessons are given at many schools, only a fraction of the students is reached each year. This will include youths from the target group.

Many parties have made an effort to implement the actions, but the target group has not been reached sufficiently due to the broad approach. Under the guise of 'every little bit helps', the actions have reached youths from the risk group, but due to the lack of precision, they are random hits and the overall effect will be limited. In addition, the broad deployment of actions can be counter-productive if it creates or reinforces the impression that ownership and use of weapons are common. This can lead to youths feeling unsafe and possibly deciding to carry weapons more (frequently), as mentioned by some of the interviewees.