



Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en  
Documentatiecentrum

Cahier 2023-19

# Developments in serious violence committed by young people in the period 2010 to 2021

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**Cahier**

De reeks Cahier omvat de rapporten van onderzoek dat door en in opdracht van het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum is verricht. Opname in de reeks betekent niet dat de inhoud van de rapporten het standpunt van de Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid weergeeft.

## Summary

### Developments in serious violence committed by young people in the period 2010 to 2021

#### Introduction

In recent years, a lot of attention has been paid to serious violent crime among young people in the Netherlands. News reports talk about a hardening of youth crime and an increase in serious violence among young people. There are also concerns in politics and among professionals.

Overall youth crime has actually decreased significantly over the past twenty years. Although a decrease in registered juvenile crime is also reported after 2015 in the Youth Crime Monitors (MJC) 2020 and 2023, this does not apply to all crimes. For example, there has been a slight increase in the number of criminally prosecuted minor perpetrators of serious assault and (attempted) manslaughter. In addition, there has been a stabilisation in the number of young adult criminal perpetrators of these crimes.

This study takes a closer look at this development for serious violent crimes, by investigating where and to what extent serious violence among young people takes place, and to what extent concerns about violent crime among young people are justified. This is done based on the following research question:

*What developments occur in the years 2010 to 2021 in (serious) violent crime involving young people?*

These developments are examined on the basis of data on young people who have been found guilty of a violent crime by the Dutch Public Prosecution Service (OM) or the judge, as well as on the basis of data from self-reports of perpetration. In this report we also sometimes refer to suspects and developments in the numbers of suspects. This concerns young people who have been identified by the Public Prosecution Service as suspects of a serious violent crime, some of whom will ultimately be found guilty.

#### Methods

To describe developments in registered violent crime among young people, the Research and Policy Database Judicial Documentation (OBJD) on criminal offenders is used. The selection of the OBJD data used for the research concerns cases in which juveniles with an age of offending between 12 and 23 were found guilty of one or more violent crimes that were dealt with in the period 2010 to 2021. Both absolute numbers of juvenile criminal offenders and relative numbers are reported: the number of criminal offenders per 100,000 peers. Percentages are also reported to indicate the share of a subpopulation compared to the entire population. Finally, the number of offences for which juveniles have been convicted in a year is also reported.

In addition to the OBJD data, data from the long-term Self-Reported Youth Crime Monitor (MZJ) is also used. This concerns cross-sectional data from a questionnaire among young people from the general population, administered in the years 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020. Young people aged 10 to 18 were interviewed during all measurements. Young adults were only surveyed during the 2015 and 2020 measurements. Prevalence is reported, i.e. the percentage of young people who report a crime in a year, as well as the frequency of offending.

## Results

The most important findings are summarised here.

### **Registered violent crime by young people has decreased**

The results in this report show that the number of juvenile criminal offenders of violent crime has halved between 2010 and 2021. However, the decline has levelled off in recent years. It is striking that the decline in the number of minor criminal perpetrators of violence is less pronounced than the declines in other crimes. This shift leads to a higher percentage of perpetrators of violence among all juvenile criminal offenders, although the actual number of perpetrators has decreased.

### **Serious violence by young people generally decreased in 2010-2021, although serious violence by underage boys slightly increased between 2018 and 2021**

The number of registered juvenile perpetrators of serious violent crimes such as assault, manslaughter and murder is much lower in 2021 compared to 2010. On average, this is almost a halving. However, there has been an increase since 2018. The slight increase in serious violent crimes in 2019 reported in the 2020 Youth Crime Monitor therefore continues in the years 2020 and 2021. This increase can largely be attributed to an increase in the number of underage male criminal perpetrators of serious assault and manslaughter. The numbers include attempted assault and manslaughter. In fact, the vast majority (more than 80%) of juvenile perpetrators of a serious violent crime have only been found guilty of one or more attempts to commit such a crime. Only a limited number of juveniles have been found guilty of completed serious assault or manslaughter. Although there will be a slight increase in this type of crime up to and including 2021, the Public Prosecution Service has signalled a decrease in the number of cases against young people for a serious crime in 2022.

### **Few changes in age distribution and proportion of female perpetrators**

The age distribution of juvenile criminal offenders of serious violence has not changed much in the period 2010 to 2021, although the peak age has shifted somewhat. In the period 2010-2012 this was still between 17 and 19. In the period 2019-2021 as well, but in the years between both periods the peak was at 20 and 21. Just as with juvenile offenders in general, the population of offenders of serious violence did not get younger over the years. The percentage of female perpetrators of serious violence is stable and low. Less than 1 in 8 of the minor criminal offenders are girls, while about 1 in 12 of the young adult offenders is a woman. That share is considerably lower than for crime in general.

### **Also a decrease in the number of serious violent crimes in 2010-2021, but an increase between 2018 and 2021 that is concentrated in the G4 cities**

In addition to the numbers of juvenile criminal offenders, the number of offenses of which they have been found guilty was also examined. The number of serious violent

crimes committed by juvenile criminal offenders has decreased in 2021 compared to 2010. However, this number has increased between 2018 and 2021. This increase is mainly concentrated in the four largest cities in the Netherlands.

### **Decreases in self-reported violent crime between 2010 and 2020**

The violent crime that was self-reported by young people also partly decreased in 2020 compared to 2010. For example, there was a decrease in the percentage of minors who indicated that they had made threats or had hit and injured someone. The percentage of minors who said they had hit someone without causing injury remained unchanged. Among young adults, the percentage who reported having committed a violent crime decreased in 2020 compared to 2015. These developments in self-reported violent crime are therefore partly similar to decreases in registered violent crime. However, they only relate to serious violence to a limited extent, which makes comparison difficult.

## **Discussion**

One of the most important findings of this study is that registered serious violent crime among young people has decreased in the period 2010 to 2021. This contrasts with media reports in recent years that talk about hardening of youth crime and an increase in (very) young offenders of the most serious offences. There does not appear to be any hardening, at least when looking at the longer-term development in the number of serious violent crimes of which young people have been found guilty. The population is also not getting younger. The age distribution of juvenile criminal offenders of serious violent crimes hardly shifts over the years.

The image of a hardening youth crime is not only present in the media, but is also prevalent among professionals. Some of them see the cases they deal with becoming increasingly serious. In light of the figures presented in this study, this is not surprising. Across the board, registered juvenile crime may have decreased in the period 2010 to 2021, but not everything has decreased equally. The decline in the number of juvenile criminal offenders of violence is less pronounced than for crime in general. And the decline in juvenile perpetrators of serious violence is less pronounced than for violence in general. The cases of young people who remain have become more serious on average. They paint the image, in contrast to the increasingly large group of young people who do not come into contact with the law. The relatively smaller decrease in the number of registered serious violent offenses may therefore say something about actual youth crime, but it is also conceivable that this development has to do with prioritisation by the police and/or the justice system.

Despite the downward trend in the long term, increases are visible in the shorter term in registered serious violent crime among young people. This includes the increased number of minor criminal perpetrators of (attempted) manslaughter in the period 2017 to 2021. In addition, during the same period, serious violent crime among minors increased much more strongly in the largest municipalities compared to other municipalities. It is recommended to further investigate the extent to which these developments are related to an increased attention to serious youth crime in the big cities, as well as the extent to which they are related to other possible explanations. It is by no means certain that the reported increases in serious violence by minors continue in the years after 2021, given the declines in juvenile suspects of serious violence in 2022 as reported by the Public Prosecution Service.

The increase in the number of underage suspects of serious violence has been linked in the media to knife violence, among other things. Knife violence and other weapon use among young people has also been a concern in politics and the policy world in recent years. In 2020, a national action plan against gun ownership and use among young people was established. This raises the question to what extent serious violent crime by young people relates to knife violence and other weapon use. And to the extent that this is the case, what exactly is the character of this violence and in what situations and in what places does it take place? In an ongoing in-depth study, these questions are being investigated by studying court verdicts of juvenile manslaughter cases and by making a comparison over time.

Finally, this study shows that registered serious violent crime among young people decreased slightly during the first phases of the lockdowns. However, for the years 2020 and 2021 as a whole, there was an increase compared to the years 2018 and 2019. This is in line with findings from several studies, which showed a limited or absent dampening effect of lockdowns on serious violent crime. This could possibly be because the opportunity for violent crime indoors and on the street had not decreased or only decreased to a limited extent, despite the limited opportunity for nightlife violence.

## Conclusion

This report provides insight into developments in violence by young people, whether serious or not. This mainly concerns numerical developments in registered violent crime, with attention to differences between type of violence, groups of young people and municipalities. We conclude the following.

- There has been a decline in registered violent crime among young people between 2010 and 2021. Due to the even greater decline in overall registered youth crime, it may appear that the problem has become more serious: there is a higher percentage of juvenile convicted perpetrators of (serious) violence among juvenile criminal offenders. However, this does not alter the fact that registered violent crime by young people has also decreased over the longer term. This observation is sometimes missing from reporting on current events.
- In the shorter term, between 2018 and 2021, we see a levelling off of the decline in registered serious violence by young adult criminal offenders and even an increase in the number of minor criminal perpetrators of serious violent crimes. The question is whether this latter increase will continue, especially given the decreased number of young suspects of serious violence in 2022. Nevertheless, it is important to keep an eye on developments.
- The increase in registered serious violence between 2018 and 2021 is concentrated in the number of underage male criminal perpetrators of the offenses of serious assault and manslaughter and in the large cities. The vast majority of crimes relate to an attempt, not the completed crime. It is unclear to what extent the increase is related to an actual increase in serious violence, or a greater focus by the government on these offenses among minors in major cities. Further research is needed to find out. A concentration of the problem within certain groups and cities does invite policy to be targeted at these groups and cities.

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