

From numbers to interpretation

An interpretation of quantitative trends in
juvenile delinquency



Summary

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Summary from:

Van cijfers naar interpretatie

Een duiding van de kwantitatieve ontwikkelingen van de jeugdcriminaliteit

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Summary and conclusions

This report focuses on an interpretation of the drop in youth crime rates as registered in the Juvenile Crime Monitor (MJC). An inventory has been made of how experts view this development and of the indicators which in their opinion may contribute to its interpretation. We provide here a summary of the study and answer the study questions formulated by the commissioning body, the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC):

1. Can experts provide a further qualitative interpretation of the major developments in youth crime, as recorded in the Juvenile Crime Monitor? If yes, what interpretation with which developments?
2. Are the indicators from the report 'Vision on youth crime' usable in interpreting the developments in youth crime and if yes, how?

Implementation of the study

The study was implemented in two phases: a preparation phase and an implementation phase. In the preparation phase, the MJC (Van der Laan & Goudriaan, 2016) and the study 'View on Youth Crime' (Ferwerda et al., 2016) were summarised in the form of an information sheet. On the basis of this summary and the focus of the study questions, a brief questionnaire was prepared. In this questionnaire, respondents (including policy assistants, frontline professionals and academics) were asked to interpret the developments described in the MJC, to indicate whether aspects are missing from the MJC, and if yes, which aspects, and to share their opinions on the value of possible additional indicators.

In the implementation phase, a total of 75 experts were approached in writing. The result was 35 reactions (response rate of 47%) in the form of 28 completed questionnaires, four interviews based on the questionnaire and three written reactions of a different kind. Subsequently, experts were invited to an expert meeting on the basis of their availability. In total, two meetings were attended by fourteen

individuals. The findings of the MJC and the central arguments which emerged from the questionnaire-based study were the central point of discussion during these expert meetings. Because not all the experts approached were able to attend the expert meetings, seven professionals were approached for a telephone interview. In the telephone interviews, respondents were first asked how they considered the developments in youth crime and how they would interpret those developments. They were then asked to reflect on the central themes which emerged from the questionnaire-based study and the expert meetings.

Outcomes

In this paragraph we discuss the outcomes of the questionnaire-based study, the expert meetings and the additional interviews. The outcomes in respect of the interpretation of developments and the value of additional indicators are the central points.

Interpreting developments

The questionnaire-based study and the expert meetings reveal that experts recognise in outline the picture presented in the MJC. This means that they agree that since 2007, a downward national trend has been observed. The developments within subgroups or in respect of specific crimes represent an exception to the rule that levels of youth crime are falling. Although registration effects – such as reduced priority in police investigation (fewer registered crimes) – could be of influence, experts suggest that explanations that go beyond the scope of the Netherlands are more likely. They base their position on the fact that youth crime rates are falling not only in the Netherlands but in the neighbouring and Anglo-Saxon countries, although no conclusive explanations have been given for this phenomenon abroad either. Explanations that apply more broadly than to the Netherlands alone include a cultural change among young people, a change in leisure time activities – more online and less outdoors – and a lack of knowledge among both perpetrators and victims of unacceptable online behaviour that from the point of criminal law is not permitted. There are also questions about the extent to which the integrated focus on problem groups and problem individuals, and as an extension of that policy, a greater focus on a combination of punishment and care, has an influence. However, whether and to what extent this approach is also common practice abroad is unknown.

In summary, it can be suggested that experts do recognise the downturn described in the MJC, and put forward a number of different explanations (at macro level). Several respondents suggest that the downward trend in youth crime is also reflected nationally and internationally in other aspects of risky behaviour (including substance abuse). It can be concluded from the interpretation of the developments that the overall picture shows a drop, with a contradictory development among specific groups and at specific locations. In other words: the local picture may deviate

from the general positive trend described in the MJC. Various respondents suggest that the downturn affects ‘the reachable group’, people who have a relatively low risk of police contacts. The psychosocial problems of and criminal behaviour by a relatively small group of young people (hot groups) at the local level (hot spots) and the resultant criminality show a clear deviation from this positive picture, according to a number of respondents. As a consequence, professionals employed in the field (on the streets, in care, in youth detention centres) do not (always) recognise the picture outlined in the MJC from their professional practice. In addition, a number of respondents suggest that the scale of self-reported crime among the under 12 as recorded in the MJC, is not reflected in their own research into and knowledge of this group of young people. Where this discrepancy between the developments described in the MJC and the experiences of these respondents comes from, cannot be determined on the basis of this study.

The value of additional indicators

The answers from respondents in respect of the indicators identified by Ferwerda et al. (2016) in part tie in with the calls for greater nuance in the findings in the MJC. Experts above all recognise added value in including indicators at macro level that fall within the cluster signal and risk behaviour (such as how young people spend their time, substance abuse, early school leaving, youth unemployment, measures in the framework of youth services and care reports). In their opinion, combined indicators of this kind can also generate added value. The combined indicators ‘care reports’ and ‘youth services’ can for example provide information on the focus on care or punishment, while the ties to society can be mapped out by considering the combination of time spent, early school leaving and youth unemployment.

They also refer to other macro indicators that could be of value, including the readiness of citizens to report crimes. These macro indicators can be used to determine the extent to which there are parallel developments between these indicators and the nature and scale of youth crime. In this way, a picture emerges not only of ‘the social aspects’ of youth crime, but it is also possible to generate input to make the step from interpretation to explanation. From the point of view of professionals, the absence of plausible (inter)national explanations for the observed crime drop is not only a shortcoming but also a risk. After all, if juvenile crime starts to rise again (something we hope will not happen), it is unknown what the causes of such a rise are, and what implications this should have for policy execution.

Conclusion

The experts interviewed by us expressed an appreciation for the approach of the study and the fact that they were asked to reflect on the developments described in the MJC. They also offered feedback on the methods employed. On that basis,

in terms of form, an expert meeting is the preferred option rather than questioning experts via a questionnaire or individual interviews. A number of the professionals suggested that access to their knowledge can be gained more easily and more detail face to face and/or they attached greater importance to mutual interaction.

The respondents consulted by us reflected on the developments in youth crime on the basis of their (broad) knowledge and experience, and not necessarily (exclusively) on the basis of the developments described in the MJC. The study revealed that the dividing line between interpretation (what is happening) and explanation (why is it happening) is narrow. This means that in this study, attention was focused both on explanations for the drop in youth crime, and its interpretation. When it comes to interpretation, this study reveals that experts (researchers, policy officers and frontline professionals) are to some extent capable of offering a further qualitative interpretation of the developments described in the MJC. These interpretations can be seen as indicators for further consideration, but are not (yet) empirically underpinned. There is a consensus among the respondents when it comes to the question of whether a more in-depth or broader consideration is needed of the understanding of youth crime – either within or in addition to the MJC.



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