



Summary

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Spotlights on the street



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Utrecht, March 2022



Summary

In this study, we have examined the integrated approach to the 'Van Wou group' from the Amsterdam Diamantbuurt. To put the choices made within the Van Wou approach into broader perspective, we also looked at two other integrated approaches to criminal youth groups, namely the Utrecht *Kopstukkenaanpak* and the Tilburg approach *Mate(n) van de straat*. We did this bearing in mind that criminal youth groups are an important breeding ground for organized crime and with the expectation that our research could benefit tackling criminal youth groups in the future.

Main question and method

The central question of this research is:

What lessons can we learn from the application of integrated approaches to criminal youth groups, and in particular the approach to the Van Wou group, in the past ten to fifteen years and what are implications of these lessons for current and future approaches?

The research we conducted is qualitative in nature. We applied multiple data collection methods, which differed among cases. For the Van Wou case, we spoke to fourteen respondents, twelve of whom had been involved in the Van Wou approach. In addition to these twelve, we also spoke with the current Youth & Security project leader of Amsterdam South (which also includes the Diamantbuurt) and with Khalid, who was considered part of the criminal core of the Van Wougroep at the time of the approach. In addition, we were also able to use judicial documentation, which provided insight into the extent

to which members (now ex-members) of the Van Wou group had come into contact with the law. Finally, we had access to policy documentation, including a number of plans of action. For the other two cases, we conducted a total of five interviews. With regard to the *Kopstukkenaanpak*, we had access to a number of internal documents and an evaluation of the approach. In the case of the Tilburg approach, we were able to use an extensive description of the approach that was sent to us by one of the developers of *Mate(n) van de Straat*. In the concluding phase of the research, we held a digital expert session during which a number of experts reflected on the main conclusions of our research and their value for the current approach to criminal youth groups.

The Van Wou approach and the other two approaches

The Van Wou approach, which ran from 2009 to 2013, was characterized, certainly from 2010, by a highly differentiated character. Central to the approach was the distinction between the red group (categorized as 'criminal core'), the yellow group (categorized as 'mainly criminal, partly nuisance') and the green group (categorized as 'mainly nuisance, novice criminal'). There were no hard criteria for this categorization. This categorization was based, to cite then-deputy district chief of the South police district, "on a combination of guesswork, experience, looking at the intensity and frequency of the offenses and their behavior." For the red group and part of the yellow group it was a matter of 'counting prison days'. In police circles, these youth were labeled as 'written off' and 'beyond recovery'. Within the district South people no longer saw a role for themselves in the approach towards the red group. One of the representatives of the district noted that outreach work (*straathoekwerk*) was the only party that was commissioned by the municipality that kept in touch with them. However, outreach workers themselves indicated that they were expected to cut off contact with the red group and avoid its known hangouts, a view that was confirmed in other interviews. 'Tailored care' was mainly

aimed at the green group (and their families), which often consisted of young boys who sometimes performed jobs for the older members of the group and of whom the involved parties felt they could still be saved from a criminal career with the right approach.

The Utrecht *Kopstukkenaanpak* and the Tilburg Mate(n) van de straat were both intensive, coordinated and integrated approaches that focused on problematic youth groups, including groups that committed (relatively) many and serious crimes. In addition to similarities with the Van Wou approach, there were also important differences. In comparison with the Van Wou approach, the *Kopstukkenaanpak*, which ran from 2012 to 2014, stood out for the fact that it not only focused on the punishment of criminal leaders but also on social assistance. Such was the core idea of the approach, whereby detention was used as a 'window of opportunity' to move criminal young people towards a life outside the criminal youth group and/or crime. The Tilburg approach, which started in 2013, followed many of the same lines as the Van Wou approach. The members of a criminal youth group were subdivided into categories – green, orange, red – that largely corresponded with the categories of the Van Wou approach. At the same time, the Tilburg approach was less rigorous in nature. The youth of the red group, whose influence on the rest of the group was to be limited, were allowed to participate in group activities in a 'dosed' way. Also, the hope that these youngsters could be reached through social assistance had not yet, or not completely, been given up.

The Van Wou approach: One approach, three images

When studying the Van Wou approach, three images dominated. An important reason for this study sprang from the question of how the intensive Van Wou approach did not prevent part of the Van Wou group from being active in serious crime today. According to the police and the district, however, this was not a question related to the approach, as they were convinced that the leaders already engaged in serious crime at the time that the Van Wou group was given

the status of criminal youth group. In other words, they were already believed to be beyond saving. The first image that emerged starts from this point of view and concerns a no-nonsense approach that quickly had an effect as it managed to take some of the criminal leaders off the street; a success in itself, which also created space for, among other things, youth work and 'tailored care' for young people who could still be protected from a criminal career. In the second image that emerged when studying the Van Wou approach, critical questions arise with regard to the way that alleged members of the Van Wou group were categorized and the intended and unintended consequences of this. Here we see the image of an approach that took the 'breaking up of the group' – the main aim of the approach in 2010 – too far; that too easily assumed the municipality no longer had a role in tackling a group of criminal youngsters. And one that too easily assumed certain youngsters were criminals. The third and final image that emerged was that of a group approach under pressure, an approach that was under a public and political magnifying glass and had to relate to other trajectories and approaches targeting young criminals. The fact that these sometimes conflicting images were able to coexist, is partly due to the fact that they relied on different sources of information and largely had different reference points.

Lessons

The lessons we learned in this research fall into two types:

1. *Instrumental lessons.* These lessons tell us what works, and under which conditions.
2. *Fundamental ideas.* This type of lesson requires the designers and implementers of an approach to think about the impact of the approach and to view it in the light of the rule of law (and everything that should result from it), the broader policy direction and the broader social issues underlying the emergence and persistence of criminal youth groups in local contexts.

Instrumental lessons

Lesson 1: The coordination and division of roles between the parties requires specific attention as early as possible.

Many of the challenges and sometimes problems within tackling arise because parties are not on the same page. This is partly insurmountable, but at the same time we are convinced that problems can partly be overcome by making agreements at the earliest possible stage about coordination and the division of roles.

Lesson 2: Assistance must be available when criminal youth is open to it.

Assistance that can help at risk youth to resist the temptations of crime must always come quickly, since crime, and criminal money by extension, is often within reach. This has consequences for the organization of the approach:

- *Contact.* The moments when young people are receptive to behavioral change can be brief. At such a moment, young people must be able to turn to someone they know and trust and who can initiate what is needed (within the range of what is possible) to realize change. This also means that it is important that there are frontline workers who have contact with these young people when such is possible.
- *Anticipation.* Because it is important that aid can be implemented when a change occurs, this should also be anticipated as much as possible.
- *Clout.* The speed with which assistance can be initiated also depends on the extent to which parties and professionals are able to get things done. This is especially important because assistance and/or care often revolves around scarce items.

- *Signal.* It is important to realize that social assistance to suspected criminal youths can also be interpreted as a signal that crime pays off and can therefore lead to dissatisfaction among people who, for example, deal with the similar social problems or live in the vicinity of the criminal youth group. Above all, this shows the importance of a broader social offensive as a side track to tackling a criminal youth group.

Lesson 3: Assistance is tailor-made and therefore never comes too early or too late.

Assistance is tailor-made and the same applies to the guidance towards it or other types of guidance of alleged criminal youngsters. This is also clear in the Van Wou approach, where investments from youth work in learning how to deal with MID youth and the recalibration of the working method from 'shelter and recreation' to 'activation and training' had a positive effect. What also contributed to this was the creation of a safe environment for both youth and youth workers. Although the latter was achieved by keeping the red group outside the doors of the youth center, the above success factors strengthen us in the idea that an approach should never be aimed at cutting off criminal youth completely from what is often called the soft side of an approach, something which seems to have happened in the Van Wou approach. Precisely because assistance is tailor-made – which means that it is always the question whether assistance from the past was sufficiently tailored to the personal situation and needs of the young person – and because circumstances and people, and certainly young people, can change.

Lesson 4: The more rigorous the consequences of a classification within an approach, the more important the classification criteria and the quality of the information about the members of the criminal youth group that feeds the classification become.

Khalid's story showed the enormous impact of the Van Wou approach on the young people of the red group; and more broadly, the far-reaching consequences an approach, even if not resulting in convictions, can have on the lives of the 'approached'. It is a bitter fact that Khalid's classification in the red group appears to have been a mistake. In addition, the judicial documentation showed that nine of the fourteen young people of the red group, most likely including Khalid, had no or at least no significant criminal record at the time of the categorization (eight of them also had no criminal record in 2021). This information puts pressure on the assumption that these nine deserved the label 'criminal core' and puts additional pressure on the municipality's assumption that it no longer saw a role for itself in the approach. And as such, this also questions the far-reaching consequences the approach had for at least this part of the red group. The lesson we link to this relates to the classification criteria. The more rigorous the consequences of a classification within an approach, the more important the classification criteria and the quality of the information that feeds this classification become. In our view, this means that for being classified as part of the criminal core of the Van Wougroep – which, and this is important to repeat in this context, bore the stamp of criminal youth group – there should have been a criminal record that could bear this label or at least strong suspicions that someone was committing crimes that had not yet led to an arrest. The fact that the majority of the red group had no or no significant criminal record at the time of the classification and also had no criminal record in 2021 seems to indicate that this was not the case for everyone in the red group.

Lesson 5: Group approaches have to relate to other approaches and trajectories that focus on the criminal juveniles in question and can directly influence the degree of control that can be exercised. There must be mutual coordination between these approaches and trajectories.

A big difference with the present time and the initial period of the Van Wou approach is that there is increasing competition for the group approach, in particular due to the arrival of ZSM and the advance of integrated person-oriented approaches such as the Top600 in Amsterdam. This can have a direct influence on the extent to which a group approach can exercise control over the approach of the young people in question, as was apparent in both the Van Wou approach and the *Kopstukkenaanpak*. This means that mutual coordination must take place between the relevant approaches and trajectories, whereby clear agreements must be made and agreements must be complied with.

Lesson 6: When scaling down group approaches, these must be properly safeguarded and when problems concerning a criminal youth group reoccur, it must be possible to create policy space in order to be able to respond to this.

The Van Wou group's approach ended in 2013 because relevant parties believed that the objectives had been achieved. Recent developments in the Diamantbuurt show that yesterday's success is not necessarily tomorrow's success. Several respondents noted that the old Van Wou group is partly back in the neighborhood, reclaiming the neighborhood as they did ten years before. Although we cannot automatically assume that there are criminal motives behind the reunification in the area, various parties involved indicated that the return of the group has not been adequately anticipated. Several reasons were given for this. The shared lesson that we derive from this is that approaches must be properly safeguarded and that, when problems arise again, it must be possible to create policy space to respond to them.

Fundamental ideas

Lesson 1: Approaches can deeply affect the lives of those who are 'approached', this entails responsibilities for the designers of the approach.

Earlier we highlighted the lesson that the classification criteria and the quality of the information relevant to the classification become more important as the consequences of a classification increase. This is based on a more fundamental point, namely that policy makers and implementers should be aware of the impact that an approach can have on a young person. The knowledge that criminal law can deeply affect people's most fundamental freedoms comes with a responsibility to think about the consequences for those targeted by the approach; and by extension, that restraint is exercised in restricting their freedoms, also based on the idea that someone is only guilty if this has been established by a judgment of the court. Considering the above, a number of questions arise when we look at the Van Wou approach. How is it possible that nine of the fourteen young people on the red list – the alleged criminal core of the group – had no (significant) criminal record (how many people like Khalid, who were wrongly counted as part of the criminal core, were among them)? Has enough thought been given to the psychological and emotional consequences of constantly watching and monitoring young people? Is it indeed true that no one could tell Khalid what the reasons were for his Top600 listing (if so, how does this relate to the principle of legal certainty and the principle of motivation in administrative law)? The fact that these questions remain unanswered even after our investigation suggests that the consequences for those targeted by the approach, or for some of them, were too easily accepted as part of the deal. Having said this, it should be noted that what happened within the Top600 was only indirectly the result of the choices made within the Van Wou approach (if we assume that the classification made within the Van Wou approach had an important say in the Top600 listing).

Lesson 2: What kind of government do we want to be?

While the emphasis in the previous lesson was on the responsibility of the government towards suspected criminal juveniles, we now shift this to the broader impact of the approach. The central question, if we ask this from the perspective of the parties and professionals involved in the approach, is: What kind of government do we want to be? This requires administrators and executives to think about the impact of the approach and to view this in the light of the rule of law (and everything that should ensue from it), the broader policy course and the broader social problems that allow criminal youth groups to emerge and persist in local contexts. The importance of this task cannot be overstated in a time that calls for emancipating policy for marginalized people and for reducing the distance between government and citizens, and therefore also for a morally credible and reliable government. In this study we did not focus on how residents of the Diamantbuurt experienced the Van Wou approach. Statements that were made about this by, among others, the then-neighborhood police officer of the Diamantbuurt and youth workers, provided evidence of a positive impact of the approach on the neighborhood and its residents. At the same time, an ethnographic study by Anouk de Koning shows that many youth from the Diamantbuurt with Moroccan roots question the harsh way in which the alleged criminal youth of the neighborhood have been dealt with (De Koning, 2016). Equally important is her conclusion that the tougher security policies – including camera surveillance, the policing of hanging around in groups and an emphasis on sanctioning – had turned the neighborhood into a "hostile" (2015, p. 160) environment for many young people, and especially those with Moroccan roots. These signals should be taken seriously, because they provide evidence of feelings of exclusion and stigmatization, while the situation in neighborhoods such as the Diamantbuurt emphatically calls for inclusion.

Lesson 3: Parties and professionals involved in an approach must be aware of the force field in which an approach operates (and will move) and must have an eye for the responsibilities, difficulties and opportunities associated with it.

The approach of the Van Wougroep was under a public and political magnifying glass, which created additional responsibilities and difficulties for the parties and professionals involved in the approach. At the same time, this also created opportunities. What we take from this is that it is important that parties and professionals involved in an approach are aware of the forces at play and of the consequences that stem from this.

In conclusion

When studying the Van Wou approach, three images emerged that could coexist, in part because they relied on different sources of information and largely had different reference points. Here we find perhaps the greatest challenge of tackling criminal youth groups, which also touches on the lessons we have learned. Different approaches are at their best when they empower the parties involved and at the same time do justice to the young people targeted by the approach, the (possible) victims of a group and the local social circumstances that allow a criminal youth group to arise and persevere. This was the case ten years ago at the time of the Van Wou approach and is still the case, while the importance of an appropriate response to the problems of urban deprived areas and the siren song of crime that is resounding here has only increased.

COLOFON

Client WODC - Research and Documentation Centre
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 With the cooperation of N. Koster, MSc
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ISBN 978-94-6409-154-0

The publicatie can be downloaded from the websites: <https://www.wodc.nl>
<https://www.verwey-jonker.nl>.

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