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Research on

**PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS CRIME POLICY IN HOLLAND**

*a summary of recent research findings*

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RESEARCH ON PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS CRIME POLICY

IN HOLLAND

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*Paper for the  
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1. Introduction

During the seventies many studies have been conducted of the attitudes towards crime and crime policies. While some progress has been made in the conceptualization and measurement of the attitude towards crime, most research on the public opinion about crime policies seems to be of the opinion poll type (e.g. "do you agree or disagree with the statement that sentences are too lenient?", "are you in favor of the reintroduction of the death penalty?"). Research on these attitudes is problematic since most citizens have scant knowledge about such issues and are not requested upon to make decisions relating to them in their daily lives.

In the Netherlands some efforts have been made to measure these attitudes in a somewhat more sophisticated way recently. When studying the results of these studies we have been impressed by their high level of consistency. Most data were based on questionnaire items which seem to have been selected because of their prima facie validity only. Yet in spite of the many differences between the various studies their results seem to be highly similar. The high consistency lends some credence to the validity of the findings.

By summarizing these findings we hope to offer some guidance to policy makers or judges who want to check their own convictions to the vox populi. Possibly these data can also be part of the much sought after explanation for the relatively mild penal policies of the Netherlands. With regard to other researchers, we can only hope this presentation will induce them to improve upon the present conceptualizations, measurements and interpretations.

The studies referred to are:

- a) A national survey on public attitudes towards crime and crime policy, conducted in 1975 by the Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Justice (C. Cozijn, J.J.M. van Dijk, Onrustgevoelens in Nederland, The Hague 1976).

- b) A survey among the inhabitants of big cities on the same topics carried out by J.P.S. Fiselier of the University of Nijmegen in 1974 (J.P.S. Fiselier, Slachtoffers van Misdrijven, Nijmegen 1978).
- c) A national survey in 1980 on crime and crime policy as part of a larger survey conducted by a commercial bureau for opinion research in The Hague (Betrokkenheid bij de Onveiligheidsproblematiek en Strafhouding, N.V. v/h Nederlandse Stichting voor Statistiek, december 1980).
- d) A local study by Buikhuisen, Drost en Schilt of the University of Groningen into the origins of intolerance (W. Buikhuisen, T.R. Drost and T.R.E. Schilt, Het Gezicht van de Onverdraagzaamheid, Assen 1976).

2. The distribution of attitudes among the population

2.1. A secondary analysis of the R.D.C.-data

In the R.D.C.-survey the respondents were asked to evaluate six different methods of crime control. In table 1 the main results have been presented.

TABLE 1. The evaluation of six different methods of crime control by a national sample from the population of the Netherlands in 1975 (N=1219); in %

	very suitable	suitable	undecided	not suitable	not suitable at all
1. re-education	14	40	19	19	7
2. incarceration	36	36	15	11	2
3. more severe punishments	60	18	10	8	3
4. social aid	27	44	16	9	4
5. hard labor	40	26	11	17	6
6. job-program for ex-delinquents	28	43	16	8	4

As table 1 shows both the repressive approach (items 2, 3, 5) and the preventive approach (1, 4, 6) are supported by a majority of the population. The repressive approach is though to be very appropriate more often, but this could be an artifact (advocates of the repressive approach could be inclined to give more definite judgements).

An attempt has been made to classify the respondents on the basis of their answers to these six questions. This classification was sought after with the help of a newly developed statistical technique, called latent structure analysis (LSA)<sup>x)</sup>. The results of this analysis have been presented in table 2.

TABLE 2. The three-category solution of a latent class analysis of the answers to six questions concerning methods of crime control (N=1219)

Items		Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
More severe punishment	yes	0.99%	0.92	0.0
	indiff	0.0	0.08	0.33
	no	0.01	0.0	0.67
Incarceration	yes	0.84	0.78	0.29
	indiff	0.07	0.12	0.32
	no	0.09	0.09	0.39
Labor camps	yes	0.70	0.72	0.43
	indiff	0.13	0.08	0.16
	no	0.18	0.21	0.42
Re-education	no	0.56	0.15	0.14
	indiff	0.30	0.14	0.14
	yes	0.14	0.71	0.72
Social aid	no	0.38	0.03	0.03
	indiff	0.35	0.08	0.03
	yes	0.27	0.89	0.94
Jobs for ex-convicts	no	0.34	0.04	0.04
	indiff	0.34	0.08	0.09
	yes	0.32	0.89	0.87
Size of classes		0.29	0.54	0.17

Least square value: 0.023.

./.

x) This analysis was carried out by J. Schalen, research assistant of the R.D.C., under the supervision of A. Mooyaart of the Faculty of Psychology of the University at Leyden.

As table 2 shows the search for latent classes has yielded quite interesting results. Three classes of respondents could be identified whose opinions on crime policy show clear and systematic differences. The respondents of the first class, consisting of 29% of the respondents, show a very strong tendency to be in favor of the repressive approach (the first three items) and a moderately strong tendency to reject the preventive approach (the last three items).

The second and largest class -containing 54% of the respondents- shows a strong tendency to be in favor of both approaches. The third class -17% of the respondents- shows a strong tendency to be in favor of preventive measures and a moderately strong tendency to reject the repressive approach (especially more severe punishment).

The results are interesting because they draw attention to the positive attitude of the majority of the population towards both the repressive and the preventive approach. The systematic differences between the three classes can also be interpreted as evidence for the validity of the measurements: five of the six items appear to be good indicators for one underlying trait (or more precisely two traits which are each others antagonists for parts of the population)<sup>x)</sup>.

2.2. The recent findings of the N.S.S.

The N.S.S. conducts regular measurements of the involvement with social problems of the Dutch population<sup>xx)</sup>. In 1980 a battery of questions concerning the prevention and control of crime was added to the standard questionnaire, which includes a question on crime. First, all respondents were asked whether they were most in favor of repressive measures (like more severe punishment) or of preventive ones (like crime prevention programs, measures to fight unemployment). Fifty percent of the respondents said to be most in favor of the repressive approach, 48% showed a preference for preventive measures and two percent was classified as undecided. ./.

x)The item on "labor camps" seems to be a somewhat less successful classifier. This is probably due to the ambiguity of its semantic content. In Dutch the concept of "labor camps" can be understood both in the reactionary way of "hard labor" as in the progressive way of "community service".

xx)Westendorp, P.H. van, Multi-dimensional Measurement of Involvement with Social Problems (Esomar, Bad Godesberg 1980).

After answering this opening question, the respondent was invited to select from a list of thirteen possible measures to be taken by the government the ones he would prefer most. Of the thirteen measures suggested to the respondent six can be classified as being repressive and seven as being preventive in nature. The preventive measures appear to have been selected on average by 33% of the respondents, and the repressive ones by 26%. In figure 1 the selection percentages of all measures have been related to the over all preference for either repressive or preventive measures, as expressed priorly.

Figure 1. The selection of favourite measures of crime control by a sample from the Dutch population, related to a previously expressed preference for either repressive or preventive measures (N=914). In %.

	Total	Advocates of repressive measures (N=455)		Advocates of preventive measures (N=441)	
<u>Repressive</u>					
More severe punishment	43	62		25	
More police	35	48		26	
More weapons by police	24	41		10	
Less restrictive use of weapons by police	22	26%	36	39%	9
More harsh treatment for convicts	21		32		10
Death penalty	13		20		8
<u>Preventive</u>					
To fight unemployment	62		52		73
Crime prevention campaigns	39		33		47
Better housing conditions	36		24		50
More leisure facilities for the young	32	33%	22	22%	48
More funds for probation, counseling, etc.	22		12		35
Anti-poverty programs	21		10		32
More funds for education	18		7		30

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As figure 1 shows the advocates of the repressive approach have selected their favourite measures somewhat less consistently with their basic attitude than the advocates of the preventive approach. These findings are globally in accordance with the results of the latent structure analysis of the R.D.C.-data from 1975<sup>x)</sup>.

In 1980 the majority of the population seems still to take a middle of the road position concerning the various ways of crime control. However if respondents are forced to choose for one of the two alternatives a small majority will show a preference for the repressive approach. The resulting majority of supporters of the repressive approach should not be taken at its face value. Confronted with concrete measures of crime control the hard liners tend to be in favor of preventive measures too.

### 3. The social and psychological background of punitiveness

#### 3.1. Socio-demographic differences

The three-classes classification, based upon the latent structure analysis, can be used as an explorative scale for punitiveness (a specific preference for sentences involving the maximum suffering for the offender)<sup>xx)</sup>. In table 3 we have presented the percentages of the various sociodemographic categories which fall into each of the three classes.

x) A latent structure analysis of the N.S.S. data will presumably yield highly similar results. The class of respondents in favor of preventive measures and rejecting the repressive ones however will probably be somewhat more sizeable than 17 percent.

xx) For reasons of economy we have satisfied ourselves with the qualification based on all six items. It could be argued however that a classification based on only two or five items would be a better indicator for punitiveness (items 2 and 3, or items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6).

TABLE 3. Percentages of various sociodemographic groups with high, mean or low punitiveness (LSA-results with four background variables)

background variable		N	high punitiveness	mean punitiveness	low punitiveness
sex	male	584	0.28	0.53	0.20
	female	635	0.30	0.57	0.14
age	young	265	0.21	0.49	0.29
	middle	563	0.28	0.56	0.16
	old	391	0.35	0.57	0.09
s.e.s.	high	147	0.22	0.50	0.28
	middle	224	0.32	0.57	0.11
	low	189	0.30	0.55	0.15
city size	small	619	0.29	0.57	0.15
	middle	173	0.24	0.61	0.17
	large	427	0.31	0.49	0.21
size of classes			.29	.54	.17

The trait of high punitiveness is not equally distributed among the various population groups, as table 3 shows. High punitiveness is connected with an age above 50 and a low or middle socioeconomic status. Inhabitants of the larger cities show a tendency to choose exclusively for either the repressive or the preventive approach. Low punitiveness is connected with an age below 25, a high socioeconomic status, and the large towns. Women show a tendency to be somewhat more in favor of repression than men.

### 3.2. Relations between punitiveness and attitudes towards crime

Within the attitudes towards crime a distinction has to be made between fear of crime and concern about rising crime or delinquency rates (Van Dijk, 1978). In most Western countries fear of crime is relatively high among the inhabitants of larger cities and especially among (young) women and the elderly living there. A relatively strong concern about

rising crime rates is usually to be found among middle aged citizens and the elderly in both rural and urban areas.

Both in R.D.C.-study and in the study of Fiselier (1978) punitiveness appeared to be only weakly related to both fear of crime and actual victimizations. The N.S.S. even found a negative relationship between a high personal concern about crime and punitiveness in their data from 1980. Persons with a high personal concern about crime showed a significant preference for preventive measures both in their primary opinion and in their subsequent selection of concrete measures of governmental crime control. A very interesting finding! According to our interpretation of these findings citizens who feel personally threatened by specific types of crime are particularly interested in an effective crime policy. The traditional repressive approach -more severe punishment, more police officers- is not considered to be effective by them<sup>x)</sup>. Their preference for preventive measures is in accordance with their own willingness to apply crime prevention techniques, whether of the avoidance or of the mobilization type<sup>xx)</sup>.

As contrasted with fear of crime the concern about rising crime rates appeared to be strongly related to punitiveness in both the study of the R.D.C. and of Fiselier. The latter found a statistical correlation between concern about crime and punitiveness of .54. Since the concern about crime rates is relatively high among middle aged citizens with conservative political ideas, this strong correlation already sheds some light upon the ideological background of high punitiveness.

### 3.3. A closer look at punitiveness

As follows from the paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2 the attitude of punitiveness cannot be seen as a response to real or perceived threats from local crime rates. If we want to understand ./.

x) Both Schwind a.o. (1978) in Bochum/Germany as Block (1971) in Chicago/USA didn't find a positive correlation between fear of crime and preference for repressive policing. The popular hypothesis that fear of crime is a medium of undemocratic tendencies seems to be true only if such tendencies are already widespread in a society.

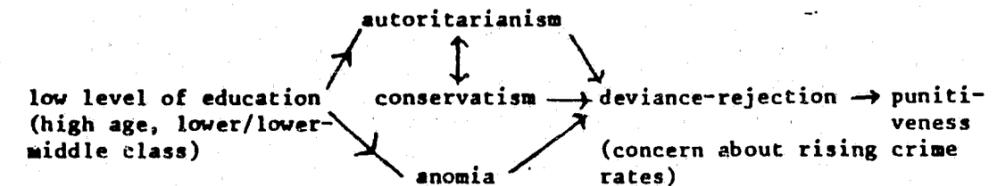
xx) Young women and the elderly who are fearful about crime tend to restrict their own behavior in order to prevent victimizations. (avoidance) Middle aged inhabitants of the big towns who are fearful about property crimes show a marked willingness to apply crime prevention techniques. Adolescents and lower class persons tend to be rather stoical about the threat of crime up to their first actual victimization (Van Dijk, Steinmetz, 1980).

this attitude we have to study its ideological or psychological roots. According to the results of a multivariate analysis of the R.D.C.-data, punitiveness is strongly related to political views. Persons who have scores for punitiveness show a preference for conservative political parties. Persons who reject the repressive approach are strongly in favor of the parties of the New Left.

Fiselier applied a multiple regression analysis upon his scale for punitiveness. Among the independent or explaining variables he included besides the usual sociodemographic factors various sociological ones. The level of education appeared to be the most influential factor by far ( $r = .47$ ). Also independently related to punitiveness appeared to be conservative (anti-egalitarian) political views. The age factor appeared to have almost no influence, independent from the level of education.

In order to understand the specific ways by which the level of education or other social background factors influence punitiveness, we have to take into account several social-psychological factors. For this reason the multidisciplinary study of Buikhuisen, Drost en Schilt into the origins of intolerance is of great value. Buikhuisen a.o. (1976) have identified three different dimensions of intolerance among the population of the Northern provinces of Holland. One of these dimensions was based predominantly on the condemnation of various forms of deviant behavior. This dimension also implied a favorable judgement about more severe punishment and the reintroduction of the death penalty. This dimension of intolerance, labeled as "deviance-rejection" by the authors appeared to be strongly related to autoritarianism as defined by Adorno and also to a weak identification with society at large (anomia). Deviance-rejection appeared not to be independently related to a high age, to church-membership or to fear of unemployment. Both authoritarianism and anomia showed at their turn a strong relationship with the level of education. In figure 2 the main findings of our investigation into the origins of punitiveness have been summarized.

Figure 2. Social and psychological background of punitiveness



### 3.4. Discussion

Our interpretation of the above discussed findings runs along the following lines. In the Netherlands a positive attitude towards severe forms of retribution cannot be interpreted as a response to real or perceived threats from local crime rates. Since persons with high punitiveness tend to feel alienated from their fellow-citizens (anomia) the development of this attitude is also not based upon the transmission of (sub)cultural norms. Neither have we found convincing evidence for the displaced aggression hypothesis of Ranulf (1964), Hayland a.o. (1970) and d'Anjou a.o. (1978). According to this hypothesis punitiveness should be interpreted as an alternative outlet for pent-up aggression which is a response to (perceived) economical threats<sup>x)</sup>. The available findings seem to indicate that a harsh attitude towards deviance is not generated by economic threat but by insecure or unclear value orientations. Persons who are insecure about their own values are presumably in favor of a repressive system of justice because such a system reassures them both cognitively and emotionally about the correctness of their own (rootless) norms. They also, by projecting their own relative "immorality" upon society, will be inclined to overestimate the social engineering function of punishment. In the Netherlands an insecure or unclear value orientation -closely connected to both anomia and authoritarianism- seems to be most prevalent among

x) In their small pilot study d'Anjou a.o. (1978) themselves have, like Buikhuisen (1976), found no relation between economic threat and punitiveness. They did find a correlation between punitiveness and forms of threat perceptions that could be interpreted as "deviance-rejection".

(non-religious) persons above 50 year, from the lower-middle class with a relatively low level of education. At other places and times the joint traits of "immorality" and "punitiveness" can of course be distributed in quite different ways.

Some public policy considerations

The relatively non-repressive crime policy of the Netherlands is actively supported by 20 or 30 percent of the population (opponents of repressive justice). Another 50 to 60 percent of the population is not opposed to this line of policy, because they are equally in favor of both repressive and preventive measures (passive supporters). About 20 or 30 percent of the population rejects the current policies because they are advocates of a more repressive approach.

There are no indications for a growing opposition towards the liberal crime policies during the last decade. Somewhat surprisingly, the recent increases of the crime rates and of fear of crime have not generated such opposition either. Persons who feel personally threatened by crime tend to prefer preventive measures to more severe punishment even more than non-committed citizens.

On the basis of these findings both the government and the judiciary could be advised not to back away from its liberal -and economical- crime policies because of a would-be public outcry about law and order. In order to maintain the (passive) support of the public for its crime policy the central and local government could also be advised to sponsor crime prevention campaigns and victim support projects as part of a widely publicized governmental response to crime. By those sections of the population who feel personally threatened by crime such programs will be welcomed as a rational line of policy, while the majority of the population will be contented by it.

The alternative course of action -the introduction of a more repressive policy- will most probably not satisfy the minority group of repression-advocates. Since their negative opinions about the severity of punishment fulfill specific psychological functions for them, they will probably reject any crime policy as being too soft, regardless of its actual content.

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