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**Session 1 – Invited paper**

**CRIME STATISTICS, WHAT DO WE NEED THEM FOR?**  
*a discussion based on the situation in the Netherlands*

Submitted by Ministry of Justice, Netherlands \*

*This article presents the current situation on Crime Statistics in the Netherlands. There are statistics on many areas within the Criminal Justice System. Some of the providers of these statistics are the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics, the Police, the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecution Service. Three examples are given of policy related projects where Crime Statistics play an important role. Based on the experiences with these and other projects some general observations are made regarding the present and future need for Crime Statistics from a policy point of view. It is found that through integration of Statistics (within the Criminal Justice System, but with Statistics from other areas as well) a better understanding of the nature of crime and the working of the Criminal Justice System can be obtained. This can help in formulating new policies.*

**I. Introduction**

1. Crime Statistics in the Netherlands tell us that the number of recorded crimes increased with a factor 10 over the last 40 years, that each year 1.6% of the Dutch population are victim of a burglary, that it takes about 300 days before a rape offender is convicted, that the prison population rate in the Netherlands is now one of the highest in Western Europe (whereas 10 years ago it was one of the lowest) etc. etc.

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\* Paper prepared by Paul Smit.

2. So what? Why is it important to know this? Is it just out of intellectual curiosity? The answer, on a more general level, is obvious: there is a need to know, quantitatively, what happens with the occurrence of crime and the law enforcement reaction on crime in order to decide if and how we have to change existing policies or introduce new policies.

3. This general answer, however, needs to be made more specific. We can look at the relation Crime Statistics - policy making in three different ways. Firstly, Crime Statistics can be used passively. This is the traditional way of using Crime Statistics. A certain trend or phenomenon is found (i.e. an increase in young offenders of violent crime) and this will cause policy makers in taking measures regarding this phenomenon (e.g. sentencing young offenders more severely). But the need of policy makers goes further than this. There is also a need to use Crime Statistics to measure the success or failure of a specific policy that is implemented. And lastly, there is a need to use Crime Statistics to help defining future policies.

4. After a short description of the present state of Crime Statistics in the Netherlands, three examples are given of projects where there is a clear relation between Crime Statistics and Crime and Law Enforcement policies.

## II. Crime Statistics in the Netherlands

5. The main providers of Crime Statistics in the Netherlands are the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and the Research and Documentation Centre of the Dutch Ministry of Justice (WODC). A victim survey, police statistics, court statistics and prison statistics are part of the statistical program of the CBS. Mainly (but not exclusively) for internal use the WODC provides court statistics<sup>1</sup> and offender statistics<sup>2</sup>. Besides, there is a second victim survey organised by the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Also, there are detailed prison statistics provided by the prisons department of the Ministry of Justice.

6. Clearly, one of the characteristics of the Dutch Crime Statistics is that the same statistics (e.g. court statistics) are often covered by two different providers. Sometimes, this is clearly not desirable as in the case of two different victim surveys. To repair this, both ministries and the CBS are at the moment involved in a project where the two victim surveys are integrated into one survey which will be carried out by the CBS.

7. But in the case of the two different court statistics we see another development: although it is nice to have an independent central bureau of Statistics providing court statistics, the main users of these statistics are policy makers and researchers of the Ministry of Justice itself. And they are more and more inclined to use their 'own' statistics, simply because they are more detailed and more timely<sup>3</sup>.

8. This leads to an interesting observation (also valid for other statistics and other countries) regarding the role of a central statistical bureau: *When the main (or sole) user of the statistics is also the*

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<sup>1</sup> Both the CBS and the WODC court statistics also include very detailed prosecution statistics. Because of the central role the prosecution service plays in the prosecution and in the trial stage their recording of cases is very complete. And these records form the basis of the statistics.

<sup>2</sup> These offender statistics are twofold: there are very detailed statistics of all persons who have at any time entered the prosecution stage, with their complete criminal history. These statistics are very useful for reconviction studies. But also, there are offender statistics for everyone who was at any time a suspected offender, with all their previous police contacts.

<sup>3</sup> Because due to the increasing possibilities in ICT a more direct access to the underlying data is possible. Which makes it easier for the owner of the underlying data (in this example court records) to make their own statistics.

*only provider of the data the statistics are based on, there is less need for a central statistical bureau for these statistics.*

### III. Some examples

9. Three examples of current projects where Crime Statistics are used extensively are the policy program "towards a safer society", the modelling of the Criminal Justice System and a study on offenders belonging to an ethnic minority. All three projects are described with an emphasis on the role of Crime Statistics.

#### *Towards a safer society*

10. This is a very large program, jointly by the Ministry of Interior Affairs and the Ministry of Justice, which started about two years ago and will continue until about 2007. The program consists of many specific policy measures and has the ambition to make the Netherlands a safer place to live in. Actually, the program was not triggered by (trends in) Crime Statistics<sup>4</sup>, but started as a result of the parliamentary elections (and the government coalition formed afterwards) where the perceived increase in criminality and feelings of unsafety was one of the main topics for most political parties. The program has some very precise targets. Also, from the very beginning of the program, it was defined how to measure the outcome for each of the targets. To name a few examples:

1. One of the targets is a reduction of crime in public spaces. This is measured by one of the victim surveys (the one from the CBS).
2. Other targets are that the public must be more satisfied by the way the police is operating and the general feeling of unsafety must decrease. These are measured by the other victim survey.
3. There are some precise targets regarding repeat offenders. How to handle them, and also the total number of repeat offenders has to decrease considerably. These are measured by the offender statistics.

11. Reflecting on these measuring points and their ability to show the success or failure of the program in fulfilling its targets, there are two important observations to be made: Firstly, there is a danger of measuring the ability of the Criminal Justice System to meet the targets, which is not necessarily the same as 'making the society safer'. As an example, the police can do their best to be very helpful for victims of crime and for the public in general. This would certainly lead to more satisfied citizens, but the result could also be that there is less time left to catch criminals.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, many of the targets are also highly influenced by factors outside the scope of the policy measures of the program. If criminality according to the victim survey is decreasing, this could be due to demographic or economic factors.

12. A conclusion could be that *it is very dangerous to make statements on the success of policy measures based on outcome statistics alone.*

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<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, Crime Statistics over the years prior to the elections tell a different story: according to both victim surveys and recorded crime, criminality was stable or had even a downward trend. Also, feelings of unsafety were stable. The only exception was recorded violent crime (and the number of persons arrested for violent crime), where there was an increase. And a logical conclusion of that would be that the police was doing a better job already.

<sup>5</sup> As another example (although an increase in the detection rate is not a target that is explicitly measured in the program), the police can put some effort in trying to make offenders who have been caught already confess also other crimes. This would lead to a higher detection rate, but to make the society safer it would have been more sensible to concentrate on offenders who are not yet caught already.

*Modelling the Criminal Justice System*

13. The primary goal of this project is to assist the budgetting process of the Ministry of Justice. It addresses questions like "How many prison cells do we need in the next 5 or 6 years?" or "If the detection rate of the police increases from 15% to 18%, how will this influence the workload of the prosecution and the courts?".

14. Based on a theoretical model<sup>6</sup>, Crime Statistics on an aggregate level are used extensively in this project: police statistics, court statistics etc. But because the model also includes external factors, statistics from completely different areas are used as well: demographic, economic and social statistics. The model gives a good insight in the working of the Criminal Justice System as a whole, including the influence of external factors. But also in the expected effect of specific policy measures. (what happens if we put more police officers on the street?)

15. As a general observation based on the experiences of this project we can say that *integrating different areas of Crime Statistics and Statistics from other areas, even if this integration is on an aggregate level, is very useful in observing the working of the Criminal Justice System as a whole and the expected outcome of specific policy measures.*

*Offenders belonging to ethnic minorities*

16. As in other countries, one of the big issues in the Netherlands from a policy point of view is the occurrence of crime within ethnic minorities. At the moment the CBS and the WODC are cooperating in a very interesting project on this subject. As a starting point the offender statistics are taken. Because the information on ethnicity in these statistics is very limited (only the country of birth is known) these statistics are linked, on an individual level, with demographic data.

17. Also, the information is linked to the so-called 'Social Statistical Dataset' from the CBS. This dataset contains, for almost the whole Dutch population, data on labour history, income and (although for a smaller portion of the population) education.

18. The resulting dataset makes it possible to untangle all the different factors that could have an effect on criminal behaviour like ethnicity, income, age, education etc. etc. And this is very helpful for policy makers to implement the right specific programs regarding ethnic minorities.

19. A general point to be made based on the experience in this project is that *integrating Crime Statistics on an individual level with statistics from other areas is very useful in understanding crime related phenomena and in formulating specific policy measures.*

**IV. Discussion / Conclusions**

20. The big challenge in the coming years is integration of statistics, preferably on an individual level. Within the different areas of the Criminal Justice System, but also with other (demographic, economic and social) statistics. This in order to get a better understanding of the working of the Criminal Justice System itself and the influence of external factors. Only then a fact based policy making is possible. To achieve this a central statistical bureau, having access to statistics in different areas is very important.

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<sup>6</sup> In a technical sense, the model consists of 400 - 500 equations. The parameters for these equations are estimated using econometric techniques. Long time series are used here, starting from 1950.