Social safety unlocked
Presumed and actual effects of safety policy

Summary

Increasing social safety – i.e. reducing actual crime and nuisance as well as improving perceived or subjective safety – has been high on the government list of policy priorities since the launch in 2002 of the Safety Programme (Naar een veiliger samenleving – ‘Towards a safer society’) by the first government under Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende. Attention in this Programme focuses mainly on those forms of crime and nuisance which affect citizens and companies/institutions in the public space. The successive Balkenende governments have targeted a national reduction in crime and nuisance of 25% between 2006 and 2010 (compared with 2002). Perceived safety must also increase substantially in this period.

When the fourth Balkenende government took office in early 2007, the general impression was that a great deal had been set in motion and achieved with the 2002 Safety Programme: the Netherlands has become safer and crimes against citizens and businesses have fallen. The project ‘Safety starts with Prevention’ (Veiligheid begint bij Voorkomen) has recently replaced the 2002 Safety Programme. The Balkenende IV government has however indicated that the objectives formulated in that Safety Programme will remain in force and that, where necessary, introduced measures will be continued.

The optimism voiced about the effectiveness of the Safety Programme was not universally shared. In 2006 the Netherlands Court of Audit stressed that ‘it is virtually impossible to determine what contribution central government policy makes to resolving the social issues for which that policy is deployed’ and that ‘there is no solid substantiation of the relationship between resources, measures and desired effects’ (tK 2005/2006a: 6).

Partly based on the study by the Netherlands Court of Audit and the recommendations derived from it, the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and the Minister of Justice, supported by the Minister of Finance, decided to initiate a research programme to investigate the ‘social costs of safety’ (Maatschappelijke Kosten van Veiligheid). On the one hand, this research is intended to meet the criticism by the Court of Audit that there is no theory underpinning the policy, that the policy is insufficiently substantiated and that there is insufficient information on the amount of money spent on safety. On the other hand, the ministers concerned wish to use the research findings to obtain a better insight into the returns on investments in safety, thus providing a more solid basis for future policy choices. The first phase of the research programme involves the performance of an analysis of the
presumed and actual effects of safety policy. The result of that analysis is described in this study, which focuses on three central research questions:

1. Which assumptions underlie social safety policy?
2. To what extent and in what way are the measures taken effective?
3. How plausible are the assumptions which underlie social safety policy?

In chapter 9 we answer each of these research questions in detail and also forward suggestions for future safety policy as well as recommendations for further research. In this summary we answer the three research questions in broad outline.

Which assumptions underlie social safety policy?
The government uses a variety of measures to increase social safety, varying from more police on the streets and the use of camera surveillance to providing care and support for at-risk young people and imposing harsher penalties. Preventive effects are expected from all these measures. In other words, it is assumed that implementing these measures will reduce crime and nuisance in the future. It is also expected that these same measures will cause citizens to feel safer. The measures taken can be categorised within a number of strategies intended to increase social safety. In this study we distinguish three main categories: (1) law enforcement; (2) developmental prevention; and (3) situational prevention. In addition, we devote attention to systemic measures, which occupy an important place within the Safety Programme.

Law enforcement
The most important general assumption underlying law enforcement is that it has both a specific and a general preventive effect and that this contributes to the restoration of the legal order. The Safety Programme frequently refers to intensification within the mainstream law enforcement system. There are two central target groups in the Safety Programme: frequent offenders and young people. However, some of the assumptions also apply to the offender population as a whole. In the first place, the Programme aims to increase the chance of offenders being caught, arguing that too many non-interventions undermine the deterrent effect of sanctions, reduce the effectiveness of sanctions imposed, and dent the credibility of the law enforcement system. In the second place, there is an assumption that shortening the throughput times within the judicial system and therefore being able to impose penalties more quickly will increase the effectiveness of the sanctions imposed, thus reducing recidivism. In the third place there is the assumption that ‘customisation’ in the application of sanctions reduces the chance of recidivism: by opting for person-specific rather than offence-specific sanctions, it is argued, both the sanctions and the aftercare will be made more effective.

Developmental prevention
In the second strategy, the general assumption is that individual offending behaviour is determined by a combination of factors including life situation, peer pres-
sure, the quality of parenting and future prospects. According to this view, the success of interventions depends partly on how early those interventions take place. Consequently, measures in this strategy are targeted mainly at young people. The Safety Programme cites risk factors for youth crime (such as premature school dropout, poor command of the Dutch language, unemployment and alcohol and drug abuse). It also stresses the need to ensure positive development by young people, for example by providing help and support. The details and implementation are however largely left to the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (vws), the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (oc&W) and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (szw) in the case of young people who have not (yet) come into contact with the police. Some interventions, especially those involving the provision of assistance, can also form part of a sanction and therefore fall within the law enforcement strategy.

Situational prevention
The strategy of situational prevention is based on the idea that modifying the ‘opportunity structure’ - for example by making it more difficult or more unattractive for potential perpetrators - will prevent offences being committed. The Safety Programme focuses on specific elements of the strategy of situational prevention. An important assumption is that repeated breaking of the rules combined with a lack of visible supervision in the public domain provides a breeding ground for an enforcement deficit that is widely felt throughout the community. The intention is therefore to send out a signal by consistently enforcing the ‘low-level norm’. Another key assumption is that extra supervision at ‘hot spots’ and ‘hot times’ produces the greatest returns. It is also assumed in the Safety Programme that, among other things by taking physical security measures, potential perpetrators can be discouraged from committing offences.

Systemic measures
In order to improve the functioning of the measures taken within the above three strategies, the Safety Programme also devotes attention to systemic measures. The most important of these, the chain approach, is mainly concerned with strengthening the relationships between different partners in the chain. In the area of law enforcement this means in the first place liaison between partners within the judicial chain: in 2006 the police were expected to deliver 40,000 extra suspects to the Public Prosecution Service, something which only makes sense if the Public Prosecution Service is able to respond adequately by adapting its working processes, while the courts must also not be overwhelmed by the number of cases being presented. The chain approach also embraces the connection between the judicial process through which the perpetrator passes and the subsequent social support and rehabilitation they receive from the probation and other services. In the developmental prevention strategy, the chain approach is concerned more with ensuring a seamless connection between the different care organisations, schools, local authorities
and the police, so that problems can be detected at an early stage and at-risk young people are not lost from view or harmed due to poor communication or contradictory strategies. The core focus in the situational prevention strategy is public-private partnership.

Systemic measures are used to make substantive measures more effective by creating appropriate conditions and improving working processes. The success of these measures depends on how they are implemented. Process evaluations, which are needed in order to assess the quality of implementation, fall outside the scope of this study, however.

To what extent and in what way are the measures taken effective?
In order to substantiate safety policy it is necessary to know whether the measures deployed have had the envisaged impact on social safety. Evaluation research should provide an answer to this. Based on a systematic literature review, we therefore mapped out the empirical findings of Dutch effect evaluations and supplemented them with findings from other countries. The search criteria produced a list of 152 Dutch effect evaluations carried out in recent decades. A content analysis was then performed on each study, and at the same time a quality assessment was carried out. Generally, it was found that the majority of the measures deployed by the government in recent decades have not been evaluated to determine their effects on social safety. A sizeable proportion (55%) of the measures implemented moreover failed to meet the minimal study design requirement (i.e. a quasi-experimental design) for an effect evaluation. As a result, it remains unclear in these cases whether any improvement in social safety is due to the measure in question or to something else. The main findings from the Dutch effect evaluations which have at least a quasi-experimental design are discussed in chapters 5, 6 and 7. In those same chapters we also discuss the findings of recent systematic reviews and overview studies from other countries, mainly the United States, the United Kingdom and other Anglo-Saxon countries.

How plausible are the assumptions which underlie social safety policy?
By confronting the policy assumptions made in the Safety Programme (answer to the first research question) with the available knowledge on the effectiveness of specific measures in increasing social safety (answer to the second research question), we obtain an insight into the plausibility of the assumptions made and are therefore able to answer the third research question. We again do this separately for each strategy, concentrating on the assumptions which we can classify as plausible or implausible and on major omissions in the policy theories. For the other assumptions and more detail, we refer to chapters 8 and 9.

Law enforcement
In the first phase of law enforcement - investigation - the main policy assumption is that sure (or consistent) punishment, via different routes, will lead to an increase
in social safety. Many measures are accordingly aimed at increasing the chance of being caught. Based on our study, we can conclude that increasing the chance of arrest has a positive impact mainly where the police concentrate their efforts on hot spots and at hot times and therefore take suspects ‘out of circulation’, at least temporarily. A high chance of being caught also appears to have a general deterrent effect. This general preventive effect does not apply where the police arrest a suspect after the event (reactive arrest), but only operates in the case of specific and anticipatory action. However, there is little plausibility in the assumption that an increased risk of being caught has a deterrent effect on suspects themselves. If anything, it actually lowers the threshold to committing new offences, especially among minors and perpetrators of relatively minor offences.

In the prosecution phase, the policy is to reduce the case throughput time, so that suspects can be convicted and punished more quickly. It is assumed that this increases the effectiveness of the sanctions imposed. Dutch research in this area shows that this assumption holds little water: more rapid imposition of punishments has not been demonstrated to have a positive effect in reducing recidivism.

A central notion in the sanctioning and aftercare phase is that a person-specific approach enables more ‘customised’ sanctions to be imposed, thus increasing the effectiveness of punishments. In the first place, a great deal is expected of custodial sentences. Imprisonment is found to be effective for the duration of the detention: suspects and convicted offenders are after all temporarily rendered harmless and have (virtually) no opportunity to commit offences. As assumed in the policy theory, however, it is not plausible to assume that incarceration will contribute to reducing recidivism after release. In fact there are even indications that custodial sentences may have a negative impact in this regard. The policy takes no account of this possibility at all, whereas the consequence for the longer term may be that people are being released who are at increased risk of recidivism. This means that detention combined with treatment, as well as other kinds of punishment, deserve attention as alternatives to custodial sentences. In line with the policy assumption, short custodial sentences in any event appear useless. If a prison sentence is chosen, it is better for it to be of sufficient length to enable the offender to pass through a resocialisation programme, provided such a programme is effective.

Although the Safety Programme looks at treatment programmes for prisoners, it largely ignores assumptions on an effective approach to these programmes. This is another gap in the policy theory. Research shows that cognitive behavioural therapy and social skills training are the most effective. The policy assumption that phased reintegration and aftercare based on supervision and support contributes to reducing repeat offending can be described as plausible.

Resocialisation programmes and support are also important for detainees with conditional sentences. The policy assumption that using these punishments as an alternative to imprisonment increases the sanctioning capacity is plausible in the short term. In the longer term this assumption is only valid if these punishments are effective in reducing recidivism. This appears to be the case for conditional prison
sentences. Where the punishments merely restrict freedom of movement and there is no resocialisation or support, the risk of recidivism is considerable. This means that conviction at a later moment will absorb sanction capacity at that time.

In the sanctioning and aftercare phase, recurrent offenders - often drug addicts - are an important target group. They are regarded as the main cause of both frequent crime and the deficiencies in law enforcement. Longer prison sentences (up to two years) are a particularly important measure for this group. From the perspective of protecting society, this measure is effective. For a select group - those who are assessed as the most open to influence - this time is used for behavioural interventions. There are indications that this reduces recidivism after completion of the programme by this group, but the rest can expect a more stringent regime, and if this means that prisoners spend most of their time in their cells this is likely to have a detrimental effect on recidivism.

The second target group identified in the sanctioning and aftercare phase in the Safety Programme are young people. For young people who commit less serious offences, the policy assumption that providing parenting support has a positive influence in reducing recidivism is empirically supported, especially if the support is supplemented by other forms of help. The idea of referring these young people to the Halt procedure is also supported. These and other ‘alternative punishments’ in any event appear to be much more effective than options such as the American ‘scared straight’ programmes, which can even serve to increase recidivism. Young people who display serious and frequent criminal behaviour are often placed under supervision and treatment or even placed in a re-education facility. As with adults, cognitive behavioural therapy and social skills training appear to offer the most promising results for young people. The policy assumption that re-education focusing on discipline (such as the Glen Mills School and the approach used in Den Engh) helps to reduce recidivism is therefore not very plausible. The criticism of the discipline-based re-education methods can as yet not be extrapolated to the zero-tolerance policy, because virtually nothing is known about the effectiveness.

Developmental prevention
We can be brief on the plausibility of the policy theory which places the emphasis on juvenile interventions. This theory does not describe any mechanisms which link means and ends, but merely links problems (delinquent behaviour) to causes (such as school dropout, parenting quality and alcohol use). We are therefore not able to assess the plausibility of this approach. Broadly, the factors cited in the policy theory are plausible as important risk factors for delinquent and aggressive behaviour, although the causal relationship that is assumed in the policy theory remains open to question. It would be desirable for future policy to set out the assumed relationship between the measures and the risk factors; only then can an assessment be made as to whether the policy has a chance of succeeding.
Situational prevention
The strategy of situational prevention focuses primarily on measures which are clearly visible and which are intended to send out a normative signal. This strategy is exclusively concerned with general prevention; as soon as someone is actually caught, we are in the domain of law enforcement. The policy assumption that formal supervision (i.e. the police) leads to a reduction in crime and nuisance can be regarded as plausible, especially where it is concentrated on hot spots and hot times. There is also support for the idea that a visible police presence is effective in increasing subjective safety. Where formal supervision is carried out using camera surveillance, the observations on effectiveness are unclear. Camera surveillance is of most use in facilitating rapid police intervention and detection/investigation. The policy assumption that camera surveillance, as a form of formal supervision, prevents crime and nuisance, is doubtful. The assumption that camera surveillance can increase public perceptions of safety can be rejected more firmly.

Measures designed to improve the protection of potential targets of crime and thus make it more difficult for potential perpetrators to commit offences, also receive a good deal of attention in the Safety Programme. These measures are concerned mainly with technical security (an area where members of the public and businesses are encouraged to take their own responsibility). Predominantly positive research results mean that this policy assumption on protective measures can be regarded as plausible. Little is known about the effect of such measures on perceived (lack of) safety.

All in all, the measures to reduce opportunity which are emphasised in the Safety Programme and which the government regards as its own responsibility, rather than that of the private individual, are heavily focused on the perpetrator. The idea of the strategy of situational prevention is however more wide-ranging. It appears that when this policy is implemented at local level, the full range of measures is deployed and measures are (also) taken which target potential victims and situations. In the policy theory, however, a choice has been made in favour of measures which are closely related to those used in the law enforcement strategy. This is a pity, because measures such as functional supervision (e.g. by wardens and inspectors) appears promising. Although the research results are by no means uniform, the findings do point in a positive direction as regards reducing frequently occurring crime and enhancing perceived safety.

General conclusion
How much do we know about whether the Safety Programme has contributed to the recent fall in crime and the improvement in perceived safety? The diverse nature of the Safety Programme means it is not possible to express a definitive opinion on the Programme as a whole. Some parts of it offer promise in reducing crime and nuisance (such as the deployment of the police at hot spots and hot times, attention for parenting support and the use of quality marks), while others do not (e.g. harsher
detention regimes, arrests for minor offences and disciplinarian re-education facilities), while the effect of others is unknown (e.g. camera surveillance).

The tackling of frequent offenders which lies at the heart of the Safety Programme illustrates the mixed results achieved with the Programme. For example, the picture on reducing ‘revolving-door crime’ is a positive one; the police and justice system not only ensure that frequent offenders are removed from the streets, but also that they are not immediately back on the streets the next day to simply carry on their criminal activities. Here we see that the policy is achieving good results in the short term, with immediate protection for society. This may also have a positive impact in terms of social redress.

Our conclusion on the target group and the process through which arrested frequent offenders pass is a much more critical one. In the first place, there is a greater readiness to arrest suspects for minor infringements, an approach which can have the unintended effect of encouraging a criminal career. Second, longer custodial sentences are imposed in order to combat revolving-door crime, but without any clarity regarding further behavioural interventions or how the perpetrators spend their time during and after their period of detention. In the area of reducing recidivism, which is key to success in the longer term, there are thus no indications that ‘sure, faster and more severe punishments’ achieve greater success than would have been the case with a different policy.