

# Less bureaucracy makes police more likely to discriminate

June 5 2015, by Paul Mutsaers

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"Less bureaucracy and a greater emphasis upon the individual officer's own personality and freedom of action have made the Dutch police highly prone to discrimination against ethnic minorities and to arbitrary behavior." So says researcher Paul Mutsaers of Tilburg University, who is calling for the "reassessment" of bureaucracy in policing, with clear authority and accountability structures and the strict separation of the person and their position. He recommends that police be required to complete a so-called "stop & search form" every time they make an arrest, to establish whether or not it was the result of ethnic profiling. "And every municipality should have a citizens' council, as a democratic counterweight monitoring police work."

Paul Mutsaers defends his doctoral thesis, an anthropological study of Dutch [police](#) behavior towards immigrants, at Tilburg University on June 12. Employed by the Police Academy of the Netherlands, between 2008 and 2013 he joined numerous street patrols and had hundreds of conversations with officers from various ethnic backgrounds about their experiences within the force and about police work in very diverse communities throughout the country. In his thesis, entitled *A Public Anthropology of Policing: Law Enforcement and Migrants in the Netherlands*, he describes both internal and external discrimination: against fellow officers as well as against members of the public. For example, he found that homeless immigrants –legal and illegal – are relatively frequent victims of police discrimination.

For some time now, the Dutch police service has been undergoing a

process of "debureaucratization": less paperwork, fewer regulations and less mandatory accountability and greater "professional freedom". According to Mutsaers, this has resulted in officers acting less like public servants performing a community duty. He claims that policing is now dominated by a culture in which officers are encouraged to act arbitrarily, as they see fit. In his thesis he describes how this blurring of the boundaries between personal insight and public duty easily leads to subjectivity and discrimination. "If an officer misbehaves," he explains, "the problem is put down to some personal psychological issue and he is simply sent off for awareness training."

As Mutsaers sees it, one "excess" produced by this organizational culture is the project known as PsyCops. This is modelled on the tactics used to manipulate and win the "hearts and minds" of the local populace in war zones. In West Amsterdam, troops have actually helped police officers in observing and understanding the standards, values, religious beliefs, family ties and political views of so-called "problem groups" – that is, immigrants. "Such infiltration into the private lives of Dutch citizens is at odds with the values of a free and democratic society," says Mutsaers. He believes that his proposed local citizens' councils would counter such practices.

Moreover, he claims, the new policing culture and the underlying policy are influencing crime statistics. "These are being 'colored' by the choices and actions of the officers on the ground. Take roadblocks, for example, where members of ethnic minorities are stopped with disproportionate frequency. People with a non-Western background are overrepresented in the figures." With such a statistical pretext in hand, it is easy for minorities to fall victim to police shows of strength. And to create a climate in which far-reaching legislative measures can be proposed, like making it a crime to be in the country without papers and withdrawing Dutch passports.

According to Mutsaers, the time has come to address police discrimination as a deep-rooted institutional problem. As recently as late 2013, national Commissioner of Police Gerard Bouman dismissed an Amnesty International report about ethnic [discrimination](#) by his force as talking about "just incidents". But earlier this year, in his own blog, he admitted to an internal culture in which Muslim officers are systematically excluded, belittled and disrespected. This of course also affects Muslim citizens. This April, Mutsaers was invited to attend a so-called Top 61 meeting to discuss his findings with Bouman and his most senior officers at a national level. He used this opportunity to call for the force to reflect on its personnel policy, organizational structures and leadership styles.

Provided by Tilburg University

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