

Display of commitment by the police is important for dealing with difficult groups of young people

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Police talk to youngsters. Credit: Beeldbank Politie

Groups of young people who cause a nuisance and/or participate in criminal activities are a recurring and persistent problem for the police. Displaying commitment is an important part of the approach to the problem, but proves to be complicated in practice. Public administration expert Anne van Uden reached this conclusion in her Ph.D. research into police approaches to difficult groups of young people, which she conducted at Radboud University in collaboration with the Dutch Police Academy. She will receive her Ph.D. on 27 June.

Difficult groups of young people comprise a persistent problem. A temporary quiet in a neighbourhood will often be broken when an older group is succeeded by and/or mixes with a new generation. Very little research has been conducted into the way the [police](#) deal with these difficult young people.

"The studies that have been carried out to date have focused on the formation and composition of groups of young people and the police's [approach](#) to them, but these studies have paid much less attention to the implementation of this approach. Moreover, the studies mainly examine crime and safety statistics, rather than looking into the police's interaction with the public," explains public administration expert Anne van Uden.

Tendency toward reaction in stead of prevention

Van Uden accompanied the police on their rounds and, based on interviews, observations and case files, she was able to establish the police's approach to difficult groups of youths, and how this approach is implemented. Her research revealed that the police approach tends to be reactive rather than preventive.

"What I saw is that the police mainly only acted when there was no other option. An alternative approach is to proactively establish and maintain contact with the groups and decrease the likelihood of problems with the group escalating. At one of the locations I studied, the police chose exactly this approach, whereby a small part of the team was involved with the youths on a daily basis," says Van Uden.

A good analysis is half the battle

It is also important for the police to carefully analyse the composition of

the group. "It sounds so obvious: You need to analyse who in the group exhibits what behaviour. However, due to a lack of time, the police often make do with only a rough sketch of the group instead of a precise analysis of the individual members. The police team should really work together with information officers in these analyses, but the distance between operational staff and analysis staff has only increased in the national police force," says Van Uden.

Collaborating with other parties could also benefit the problem analyses, she thinks. "Youth workers could play a preventive role, but a lack of mutual trust and a difference in perception of each other's roles makes this cooperation difficult."

Displaying commitment and taking preventive action

According to Van Uden, the successful implementation of the approach to groups of young people depends on the display of commitment. It is clear from the study that this commitment involves three aspects: the police need to be visible to the public, take account of people's individual circumstances, and acknowledge the importance of treating the public in a fair and respectful manner.

"Seeking and maintaining contact plays an important role in all three aspects and also contributes to more effective problem analyses," says Van Uden. "Moreover, police officers themselves told me that making contact is an important way for the police to win the trust of the boys in the group."

One of Van Uden's recommendations is therefore to pay more systematic attention to police commitment. "And this goes further than organising one or two meetings in which the importance of that commitment is explained," says Van Uden.

Police work is more than crime fighting

Police work is often assessed based on crime and safety statistics. "That's a one-sided look. The work of the police goes much further than crime fighting. You need to be careful about drawing conclusions based only on crime or safety statistics. The police should also be assessed based on how they deal with the public. Only then can you draw any kind of conclusion about their value to the community," says Van Uden.

More information: "Youth groups and good police work: An empirical study of the approach in the Netherlands" (in Dutch: Jeugdgroepen en goed politiewerk: Een empirisch onderzoek naar de aanpak in Nederland): [www.boomcriminologie.nl/crimin ... n-goed-politiewerk-1](http://www.boomcriminologie.nl/crimin...n-goed-politiewerk-1)

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